

THE LAST EDUCATIONS:
GENRE, PLACE, AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

A Dissertation
by
LOWELL MICK WHITE

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2010

Major Subject: English

The Last Educations: Genre, Place, and the American University

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Paul N. Christensen
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	John J. McDermott
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August 2010

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ABSTRACT

The Last Educations:

Genre, Place, and the American University. (August 2010)

Lowell Mick White, B.A., University of Texas at Austin; M.A., Texas A&M University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Paul N. Christensen

The Last Educations: Genre, Place, and the American University consists of three interlocking novellas dealing with themes of change and dislocation in contemporary Texas, focused on the institution of the modern university, an institution that itself is undergoing rapid and irreversible change.

Crucial to the dissertation is a thorough understanding and demonstrated proficiency of the genre of the novella. The creative text will illustrate how the novella can be used to achieve narrative depth and insight into the changing social context of the contemporary individual; the critical introduction will discuss the history of the genre and its emergence in recent years as a powerful vehicle for the depiction of change.

The overall subject of the creative text is change, and the ways in which individuals react to change—changes to the institutions to which they devote their lives, and changes in the localities and regions they inhabit. The immediate setting for the novellas is the contemporary university, an institution currently undergoing transformations which will have implications for all of American society.

DEDICATION

To the memories of

Glen Lowell White, Ph.D.
(1928-1976)

and

Carol Mick White, Ph.D
(1933-1988)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people helped this dissertation become what it is. Pamela Booton provided crucial support at all times, and wise advice was offered by Patricia Bjorklund, Abigail Bowers, Alysa Hayes, Chuck Taylor, and Javier Van Wisse. My committee chair, Dr. Paul Christensen, was always a source of wisdom and enlightenment, and the members of my committee—Dr. Jerome Loving, Larry Heinemann, and Dr. John J. McDermott—were very generous with their advice, time, and encouragement. Special gratitude is extended to Frederick Von Drasek for giving me the initial idea to go to graduate school, and to my students, for providing much encouragement and amusement along the way. Thanks to everyone.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My dissertation, *The Last Educations: Genre, Place, and the American University*, consists of three interlocking novellas dealing with themes of change and dislocation in contemporary Texas, focused on the institution of the modern university, an institution that itself is undergoing rapid and irreversible change.

Crucial to the dissertation is a thorough understanding and demonstrated proficiency of the genre of the novella. The creative text will illustrate how the novella can be used to achieve narrative depth and insight into the changing social context of the contemporary individual; the critical introduction will discuss the history of the genre and its emergence in recent years as a powerful vehicle for the depiction of change.

The overall subject of the creative text is change, and the ways in which individuals react to change—changes to the institutions to which they devote their lives, and changes in the localities and regions they inhabit. The immediate setting for the novellas is the contemporary university, an institution currently undergoing transformations which will have implications for all of American society. Increasing corporatism on the part of administrators, along with the consumerist demands of the public, are displacing traditional areas of scholarship and changing the way that knowledge is transferred—in many cases

This dissertation follows the style of *Southwestern American Literature*.

actually transforming “knowledge” itself into “information,” and altering conventional forms of pedagogy. By setting *The Last Educations* on a university campus, I attempt to show these changes through the actions of individuals who are also stressed, caught at moments of deep personal dislocation and anomie.

The larger setting of the novellas will be the southwestern United States, with a focus on the state of Texas. Texas, in the midst of a population boom that will increase its national political and cultural power, is, at the same time, through changing demographics within the population boom, undergoing an alteration of its own ethnic self-image. Through its location at the border between the United States and Mexico, Texas has always been a shatterbelt of competing cultures and values: Native Americans and Mexicans were overrun by Anglo Americans, who were followed in the later 19th century by waves of immigrants from Central Europe, and in the 20th century by internal migrants from the American Midwest, and by immigrants from Latin America. By the turn of the 20th century, a regional myth developed that valorized the Anglo frontier and its associated white-male political supremacy; however, that mythic world no longer exists (whether it ever did is another question), for the state that is emerging in the 21st century is urban, disassociated from the region and its history, and increasingly non-white. This diverse present is engaged in a constant dialogue with the mythic past, a dialogue in which meaning and status are undergoing a continual redefinition. This tumult of dislocative change is an aspect of the setting of *The Last Educations*.

This introduction contains four sections detailing the scope and objectives of the dissertation project. Part One discusses the evolution of the novella as a genre primarily concerned with societal change. Parts Two and Three discuss how changes in the

contemporary university and the southwest can be efficiently depicted by novellas. Part Four offers a short discussion of the three novellas which comprise the creative portion of the dissertation. The Summary which follows the creative text briefly discusses my personal and professional relationship to the dissertation.

The ultimate questions this dissertation responds to are complex: How much loyalty do individuals owe institutions? What is the proper reaction to change? What does it mean to be educated? How do people relate to their location?

The answers, I think, are demonstrated in the lives enacted by the people of the Southwest, in the almost innumerable choices they make every day: choices in housing, education, employment, in the basic construction of their lives. *The Last Educations* is intended to exhibit the form of the novella and a deep understanding of how the novella is used to depict societal and institutional change.

The Novella

In recent years the genre of the novella has enjoyed a renaissance both in terms of popular readership and critical interest. Numerous story collections are anchored by a novella, collections of linked novellas are marketed as novels, and at least two publishers have emerged in recent years specializing in the publication and promotion of novellas. Writing in a recent issue of *Poets and Writers*, novelist Josh Weil says that the form has been “reborn around the world,” giving readers a reading experience “just long enough to lose [oneself] in” (31). In an essay listing her favorite novellas, Rene Gladman asks:

...to venture into the writing of our own novellas, we have to, in a sense, define what is at stake. What is it about our subject, or our relation to that subject, our thinking of it, that demands this particular form? (Gladman essay)

For me, it has become clear that the novella's combination of compositional brevity and narrative depth make it a particularly useful vehicle in which to depict the psychology of the individual in a rapidly changing world, as well as the relationships between individuals and locational space.

The novella is a form whose roots stretch a surprisingly long way back into Western literary history. In *Anatomy of the Novella*, Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi trace the term back to the classic world and the Latin *novellus*, meaning “young or new,” which was used to refer to treatises on animal husbandry; by the 14th century the word had acquired additional meanings in Italian, including “news” (4). According to Charles E. May, it was in this period that the term novella was first used by Boccaccio to describe his *The Decameron* (c. 1350); the newness of his work was a result of the thematic location in the “profane world,” as opposed to the “sacred world” of Dante (3873). Clements and Gibaldi point out that “news”—accounts of occurrences in the contemporary world—was also an important element of *The Decameron*, which was written in the time of a “deadly plague afflicting Florence,” as well a time of redefinition between church and state (4).

Though Boccaccio had imitators throughout Europe, the novella remained a somewhat static genre until it re-emerged in 19th-century Germany, where, May says, the genre began “shifting the focus from simple events to events that take on symbolic meaning and form”

(3874). John Martin Ellis, however, argues that the German novella has little in common with the Italian novella:

A pre-existing word was taken up and it filled the vacuum that events had created; but it was the *character of the vacuum* that dictated what meaning the concept would have, not the original meaning of the word in the former context from which it was borrowed (19).

Ellis argues that there were, in 19th century Germany, “few important writers of novels, but very many talented writers who wrote neither novels or short stories but something of intermediate length” (19). And so the term—the concept—was appropriated.

In *The German Novella: Two Centuries of Criticism*, Siegfried Weing shows how the novella became not only a popular genre for German readers—an entertainment—but also became an important form for critics, many of whom were themselves novellists, who tried to understand and define the ways in which the genre reflected the transformations taking place in German society. Though later British and American critics focused on length as a determinative characteristic of the novella, the Germans of the 19th century seemed more concerned with how form and content distinguished the novella from the longer novel and the shorter tale.

For example, some German novellists concentrated on the size or importance of the incident depicted in the narrative: Christoph Wieland said that a novella is a small, interesting narrative that contains one main situation (Weing 18), while Christian Friedrich Schwan said that novellas are small, invented stories and wondrous events that serve only as entertainment (Weing 18). Ludwig Tieck focused on the depicted event and anticipated

what might be called a plot: “Once the event in the novella becomes self-evident, it is accompanied by a natural, yet dramatic change of direction in the story line that leads us to an unforeseen, but logical ending” (quoted in Weing 35). Tieck also stressed the importance of the turning point, or *Wendepunkt*, to the structure of the novella, as E. K. Bennett further quotes him:

“A genuine Novelle may be bizarre, arbitrary, fantastic, witty, garrulous, losing itself completely even in the presentation of side issues, tragic as well as comic, profound and saucy—all of these qualities are possible in the Novelle—but it will always have that extraordinary and striking turning point (*Wendepunkt*) which distinguishes it from every other narrative form” (quoted in Bennett 11).

Other novellists argued that the depicted events should be taken from ordinary life, but at the same time be unusual. August Wilhelm Schlegel, for example, said that novellas are “accounts of events that occurred...that constitute remarkable events” (quoted in Weing 28), and later said that the novella should “should portray reality in its everyday pedestrian manifestations,” though, “Simultaneously, however, the event described must also be extraordinary...this constitutes the dynamic tension of the novella” (quoted in Weing 29). Karl Immermann said “a novella is short and narrates a strange incident that seems to have occurred. The mainspring of the novella...is the plot” (quoted in Weing 38). A character in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s novella, *Unterhaltungen*, describes novellas as being based on events that occur in everyday life, and that they therefore “possess a charm that exceeds that of novelty...involve an ingenious twist...reveal hidden aspects of human

nature...or portray strange instances of tomfoolery” (quoted in Weing 20). Goethe later defined the novella as depicting an “unprecedented event that occurred” (quoted in Weing 26).

Still other novellists defined the novella in opposition to the novel. Friedrich Schlegel says straightforwardly that the novella is a streamlined novel (Weing 26), while Theodor Mundt argues that whereas the novel has a “diffuse” ending, the novella “rushes toward a well-defined, concluding ‘Pointe’ which is an obvious development or outgrowth” of the turning point (quoted in Weing 37). And, according to Weing, Heinrich Laube “distinguishes between the novella and the novel. The former deals with the process of becoming, the latter with the finished product of this process” (38).

The concept of “news” continued to play a role in the conceptualization of the novella. Though Friedrich Schlegel claimed that the novella should be “of interest in and of itself alone, without regard to any connection with the nations, the times, the progress of humanity, or even the relation to culture itself” (quoted in Good 154), he seems to have been in the minority. Goethe’s *Unterhaltungen*, for example, according to Graham Good, takes *The Decameron* as a model, and is populated with characters fleeing the French Revolution who comment on contemporary events (154). Weing says that “Since Goethe believed the Revolution ushered in a new historical epoch, and since he witnessed unprecedented events, he chose the novella as the medium for best mirroring this era” (146). Weing also cites Paul Klussmann’s study of novelist Ludwig Tieck, “who realized that the new political and social order of Germany demanded a new artistic approach and chose the obscure novella...” (138). It seems likely that the flowering of the novella in 19th century Germany—a time of rapid industrialization, concentration of central

government, and changing relations between individuals and the state—reflects the ability of the genre to provide concise depictions of change.

Though the literature of English does not have the history or depth of the German novella tradition, American and British writers also wrote novellas, of course. Most of these novellas use an informal first person narration, and frequently use a classic German framing device. The plots are generally built around unusual events that seem to have happened, and are, on the whole, thematically concerned with change. A few examples: Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, published in 1853 and in book form in 1856, demonstrates a baffling and destructive employer-employee relationship set in an American whose hierarchy and economy were undergoing a period of growth and solidification. Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, first published in 1878, shows how changes in American society and the growing accumulation of wealth come into conflict with Old World values of aristocracy. *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, first published as a book in 1902, shows the social limits of imperialism, and the beginnings of its demise. The traditional framing device used in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator's account of Marlow's tale to his listeners aboard the boat in the Thames, parallels Marlow's search for Kurtz. In *A River Runs Through It*, published in 1976, Norman Maclean explores a family tragedy in an American West that is undergoing environmental degradation and loss. Although the family tragedy is the main focus of the novella, the narrator emphasizes that he is telling a story about a place in the midst of a transformative period of change. Don DeLillo's *Pafko at the Wall*, first published in 1992, juxtaposes two significant, simultaneous events that took place in the fall of 1951: the public revelation of the detonation of an atomic bomb by the Soviet Union, and the special playoff game to

determine that year's National League pennant (the game that famously ended with Bobby Thomson's game-winning home run, "The Shot Heard 'Round the World"). Unusually, DeLillo uses an omniscient third-person narrator in his novella, moving around the stadium to show the game from different points of view, all the time focusing on the event and the implied transformations that stem from it.

Many of the theories developed in Germany were used in British and American literature, and still inform our conception of contemporary fiction; most importantly, the fact that a narrative—a short story, a novel, a novella—is about something that happened. An *event*, a happening that might be wondrous or unprecedented or remarkable—or maybe just a strange instance of tomfoolery. *In Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular*, Rust Hills claims that a short story "tells of something that happened to someone" (1), and the same is apparently true of the novella: something happens to a character that sets off a train of incidents that culminates in a decisive moment of change for the character—or not (the lack of change can also be decisive). This can be reduced to a five-step paradigm:

1. Life is going along for the protagonist.
2. The story begins.
3. Things happen in the story.
4. The story ends.
5. Life goes along—but it's different, because of what happened in the story.

A classic illustration of the short story paradigm is found in a story I often teach, Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp." The story begins as young Nick Adams gets in a boat and crosses a lake with his physician father. The doctor delivers a baby. They find

that the baby's father has committed suicide. They go back across the lake—and Nick's life, his perception of life, is changed. It's different. Though every literate person can probably come up with exceptions to this paradigm, I think it nonetheless holds true for the vast majority of short stories. While actions take place in stories, they are usually too simple to constitute a plot; while there is certainly no plot to "Indian Camp," it remains an exceptionally powerful story. Like other short stories, it derives its power through psychological insight, precise detail, and overall compositional concision. But even a complex short story, a story that attempts to depict the main thrust of a character's entire life and has many different actions in it—Thom Jones's "The Pugilist at Rest," for example—is concise, achieving its purpose in a relative handful of pages.

"The Pugilist at Rest," a story narrated in the first person, begins in 1968 in Marine Corps boot camp, follows the narrator through to Vietnam, shifts up to the present (the story was published in 1992), back to the narrator's post-Vietnam garrison duty, slips into brief essays on ancient Greek boxing and the history of epilepsy, and ends in the present, with the narrator struggling to decide what to do with his life. It is a complex, shimmering, circular narrative that focuses on the themes of loss and guilt and redemption, and seems very removed from the simple linearity of "Indian Camp." Yet it is undeniably a short story: it concentrates on the psychology of the individual—in this case, an individual who struggles to achieve a level of balance and grace. The situation the narrator encounters—life in the Marines in the late 1960s—is presented not in a larger societal context but as a personal crucible in which the narrator's personality is developed and tested. The story achieves that elusive quality of "depth," but it is a personal depth rather than a situational or social one.

Novels focus more on the relationship between the individual and society. An example here would be *The Great Gatsby*, a novel I've seen several times listed as a novella, apparently because of its relatively short length (50,000 words or so). But it's not, really. It's a novel that deals with the relationship between the narrator, Nick Carraway, and the society he finds himself in, represented by Tom and Daisy and Gatsby and the rest. Nick is constantly observing and learning, measuring his life and values against the lives and values he encounters. This, I think, is a novelistic approach; the looseness of compositional space allows Fitzgerald to portray a society at a specific time and place.

E. K. Bennett says:

The novel, described graphically, advances in a definite direction from one part to another. This line along which it moves need not absolutely be a direct one, and indeed rarely is; it can twist and turn, pause, spread itself out, loiter, only its general direction must be towards the point which is its aim (6).

Though this is a somewhat antiquated description of the novel—it was published in 1949—I like it for its description of the elasticity of the novel's compositional space. With its practically unlimited space, the novel can go almost anywhere. The novella, with its more constrained compositional space, is necessarily more limited in its scope. Bennett quotes German novelist Paul Heyse;

The particular charm of this literary form [the novella] consists in the event being sharply outlined in a restricted framework...herein differing from the wider

horizon and the more varied problems of character which the novel spreads out before us (quoted in Bennett 13).

While the contemporary short story, due to its brevity, offers only a glimpse of the character's internal life, and often, if not usually, has an open and ambiguous ending, the novella, with its somewhat greater length and depth, can aim for a greater sense of narrative completeness. Like a short story, a novella's protagonist has his or her life changed by what happens in the novella; but the "things that happen" in the novella—the actions—are connected, are deeper and more complex, and they in fact often (though not always) constitute a plot. I hold that it is this element of *depth* that is the defining element of the modern novella, not length.

There are those who would argue differently, of course. Charles May says:

Although the term "novella" is used to refer to both short pieces of fourteenth century fiction best exemplified by *The Decameron* and the highly developed nineteenth century German form, it is more often used in the twentieth century to refer to a number of works of mid-length, somewhat longer than the short story and somewhat shorter than the novel (3874).

For May, apparently, it all comes down to length, with the additional inference that the contemporary novella (May was writing in 1983) is somewhat different in form than the German novellas of the 19th century.

In “Why Not a Novella?,” his 1998 introduction to *The Granta Book of the American Long Story*, Richard Ford asserts that the novella is so indistinct as to not exist at all as a separate genre, and that what is commonly referred to as a novella is really nothing more than a long short story. Henry James, Scott Fitzgerald, Nathaniel West, and Edith Wharton, Ford says, all

...wrote what they or their reviewers called novellas, but in their stories these writers made no special effort to employ the traditional [19th century Germanic] structure and intellectual hardware (cyclical ordering, the framing device, turning point, the specific use of symbols) (xxii).

This might just mean nothing more than that these “traditional elements” are not necessary to the genre—or that these American writers were not writing 19th century German novellas. Whatever. Ford argues that length alone is an indistinct standard for defining a literary genre: “Length certainly doesn’t constitute a shaping purpose” (xxix).

Ford is essentially correct here, though his reasoning is inverted. Length, however nebulous, is only the most obvious way of looking at any genre of fiction, and emerges as a *result* of the shaping purpose—the “shaping purpose” being the writer’s intention to fill the available compositional space with narrative. A blank page or computer screen presents the writer with a practically infinite space, and the process of writing is the process of imaginatively occupying the available space. The decisions a writer makes during the composition of her or his narrative forces the narrative into different forms, resulting in a short story or a novel—or a novella. Length, then, is merely the most external attribute of

genre; the internal elements used to fill the space are determinative. And so while the short story concentrates on the psychology of the individual within a constrained compositional space, and the novel concentrates largely on the relationship between society and an individual (or individuals) in a practically unlimited compositional space, the novella demonstrates the psychology of the individual through action, in depth, in a loosely expanded compositional space. As Howard Nemerov says, the definition of the novella is “not a question of length, but much rather a question of depth...” (60).

It is my feeling that the current resurgence in the novella’s popularity is tied to its ability to use narrative depth to respond to and depict societal change. To restate Siegfried Weing’s quote of critic Heinrich Laube: the novella “deals with the process of becoming...” (38). In its narrative depth, the novella offers writers a way in which to depict change—“the process of becoming”—in more detail than is possible in the short story, while at the same time avoiding much of the diffusing expository clutter and plotlessness that can occur in the contemporary novel. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use the novella as the medium for the creative text of my dissertation.

The University as Place

That the American university is undergoing a period of transformation is apparent to anyone who has to teach a class or has taken a class—certainly apparent to anyone who glances at the headlines in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or *Inside Higher Education*. The narratives of *The Last Educations*, set on and around the campus of a major university, deal with how individuals respond to the changing academic world, and what their responses might mean. The ultimate implications of these transformations, or how they should ideally be responded to, are issues somewhat beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In *The Last Professors: the Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, Frank Donoghue portrays the Liberal Arts in a state of terminal decline, beset by corporatism, declining literacy, and the valorization of the sciences. He argues that this state is not a sudden crisis, but rather the inevitable result of a century-long conflict about the goals and values of the modern university (1). Donoghue says, “Not only are the humanities losing the battle over the curriculum to more practical and more business-like disciplines, but humanists are also losing the rhetorical battle to define the meaning of higher education” (86). Donoghue sees little hope selling the humanities in direct competition with professional schools:

In an effort to stem that tide, humanists have tended to produce one manifesto after another in defense of the intrinsic good of critical thinking. Instead, I believe that humanists must first use the tools of critical thinking to question the widespread assumption that efficiency, productivity, and profitability are intrinsically good (d-88).

Donoghue documents a long history of antagonism between the humanities and politically powerful business interests, and he predicts that most schools will attempt to emulate the for-profit universities and devote more and more resources to vocational disciplines. Others, though, will attempt to attract students through high status—“high status” generally meaning a high ranking on the *US News & World Report’s* list of top universities.

Sociologist Gaye Tuchman demonstrates the actual effects of educational corporatism and high status in *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*. “Wannabe U,” a loosely disguised University of Connecticut, where Tuchman is a faculty member, has made a strong run in recent years to rise in national rankings, and has instituted administrative practices adopted from business and industry. These include surveillance, conformity, a push toward quantifying the results of instruction—all parts of what Tuchman calls the “audit culture” (61)—and an increased emphasis on revenue-producing programs, resulting in “the transformation of knowledge into capital” (59). Tuchman says, “Rather than the university being subordinated to the production and transmittal of knowledge, knowledge is now subordinated to the needs of the universities for profit and recognition” (11).

Both Donoghue and Tuchman see the “deprofessionalization” of the professorate as a major threat to higher education. Deprofessionalization already exists in many fields: dentists don’t clean teeth any more, dental hygienists do; lawyers don’t draw up wills, paralegals do; my cardiologist seldom actually meets with me, while his physician’s assistant often does. The system eases the workloads of the highly-educated and highly skilled practitioners, while dumping that workload off onto meagerly-paid para-professionals. Deprofessionalization has existed for some time in higher education, of course, in the adjunct system, where low-salaried instructors teach the bulk of the classes, especially composition and intro to literature, the service classes that keep English departments afloat. Administrators love adjuncts: they work cheap, don’t require benefits, are generally passive, and are expendable. But Donoghue and Tuchman see a new and different threat that deprofessionalization poses to the professorate: the dangers that the corporate administration, aided by instructional technology, will reduce the actual job

functions of “professor” and reduce education itself to mere vocational training. Donogue writes:

They are also eliminating the figure of the professor from higher education, detaching research from the mission of the modern university and turning faculty into full-time, information-delivery personnel (87).

Well, full time for the lucky ones. Tuchman basically concurs:

Universities are no longer to lead the minds of students to grasp truth: to grapple with intellectual possibilities; to appreciate the best in art, music, and other forms of culture; and to work toward both enlightened politics and public service. Rather, they are now to prepare students for jobs. They are not to educate, but to train (41).

One aspect of deprofessionalization will be the increased emphasis on distance and online education. If nothing else—the efficacy of online education aside—the web instruction enables administrators to supervise, document, and evaluate all instructor-student interactions. Overall, higher education is moving into what Tuchman calls an “accountability regime,” which she likens to Foucault’s panopticon (45). Professors of the future will be teaching in a culture of audit and accountability, under increasing pressure to document time spent teaching and researching, and required to provide evidence of their educational outcomes.

Students, on their part, seem in many cases to respond to corporate culture by taking a consumerist attitude toward their own educations—seeing school and learn as objects that they have paid for and are entitled to. This student consumerist view of education has resulted in recent years in the creation of professor-ranking websites such as ratemyprofessors.com and myedu.com. On these sites, students can comment on the qualities they admire or deplore in their college instructors. The anonymous character of the comments is crucial to the tension of these sites: students allegedly feel free to comment without fear of reprisal, while educators fear that anonymity will result in ringers doing the rating, or in the same person doing evaluation after evaluation. A further fear by educators, one I’ve heard expressed by many of my colleagues, is that hiring committees will use these sites when researching job candidates.¹

My own experience with the rating sites have been relatively benign. I have a mere three comments on ratemyprofessor.com, all of which are more or less positive:

- Fantastic! Very interesting
- He cares...
- Awesome Prof... Fun discussions and enjoyable papers to write. It isn't the easiest class in the world but i was able to get an A in the shortened summer session. (hint utilize freewrites and office hours) (RYM)

I even received a coveted (by most instructors; disdained by others) chili pepper in honor of my personal attractiveness—or, as it’s often put, for being “hott.” Still, students can be

¹ Though, of course, consulting these easily available but poorly-sourced comments would be...unethical.

harsh, and I'll never forget my shock at seeing a friend of mine, a fine teacher and scholar, labeled a "loon" by some knuckleheaded student.

At Texas A&M, myedu.com (formerly known as pickaprof.com) seems to be the more popular service. It is a pay site, costing \$20 a year, and includes professors' grading histories and books lists, among other services. My reviews at myedu.com are also more or less positive:

Strengths: Professor White is a nice teacher and his class was fun. Most of the work is done outside of class (4 papers) and coming to class is required because he makes you write reviews on the readings but don't sweat it because the reviews only have to be 150 words and you can write anything you want on them-they are basically there to give you an attendance grade and make sure you come to class which is fun anyway and can be helpful when doing peer reviews. If you want to do good in his class go to the office hours-it can bump your grade up at the very least a letter grade, if he tells you he wants you to change something in your paper do it! It can make or break your grade. He is a nice person and teacher and I would recommend taking him.

Drawbacks: Sometimes I felt like I had to write material to please him but maybe he was just trying to make me a better writer.

Strengths: He is by far my favorite prof I have had at A&M yet. I am horrible at English and every paper I wrote he thought was gold! He boosted my confidence which helped me become a better writer. His classes are entertaining and

attendance is very important. If you actually care about his class and are improving, he notices and rewards you. Go to the extra credit assignments! I got an A without stressing or trying very hard. 4 papers, and I think they were 4 pages double spaced, maybe not even.

Drawbacks: Yes, you actually have to venture in the library or annex and do research for your papers.

Strengths: Has passion for writing

Drawbacks: Bad handwriting! Great teacher but needs to type his comments!
(myedu.com)

The comments at myedu.com and ratemyprofessor.com are delivered with the same kind of consumerist urgency that non-students apply to ratings of cameras or movies: Does it work? Is it good? Does it deliver good value? But the problem—and it's the main problem with the entire consumerist conception of education—is that education is a process, and not an object. A camera takes good photos, or it doesn't; a movie is funny, or it's not. But the effectiveness or ultimate value of an education is not always readily apparent. And while the functionality of an electronic gizmo is usually evident, most students—certainly most outsiders—don't know what goes on in a college classroom, or what it is, exactly, that a professor does.

This was made very clear in the fall of 2009, when Gina Barreca, an English professor at the University of Connecticut, and a blogger/columnist for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, used her blogspace to run some student-written papers from one of her creative

writing classes. The prompt Barreca gave to her students was to write five things about what professors don't know about school. Each student gave a list of five things. Alana Wenick wrote, for example:

3) You probably know this just as well as we do, but seeing you in a place outside of the academic setting is one of the most awkward moments ever. When you're done with class everyday we like to think that you disappear, surfacing at random moments to check your email, and then slinking back into oblivion. We imagine all professors kind of like holograms, turning on for class and then pressing the off-button afterwards. Bathrooms are especially awkward. If I hear you peeing next to me I am instantly uncomfortable and slightly nauseated. Not to mention the added stall-to-stall conversation is completely disturbing. Okay, Dr. Chatty Cathy? (Wenick post).

Michelle P. Carter wrote:

1. We make lists of all your weird-ass mannerisms. You start every sentence with "that said." You say "literally" when you mean "actually" or "I'm not exaggerating." You squeak "m'kay?" at every lull in your lecture, just to make sure that the crickets you hear and the tumbleweed you see blowing through this 300-seat hall is just your imagination. You stroke your chin whenever someone coughs. You're loud enough to wake the dead. You need to know that we make games out of these things. We count how many times you say "sort of" in 50 minutes (it was

almost 200, by the way). We instigate a chorus of coughs to see if we can get you to rub that stubble off your chin. If we made a drinking game out of every time you wiped your glasses on your blazer, we'd all be three sheets to the wind by the time you fired up that pointless PowerPoint. And you need to know that these are the things that define you between students. "Oh, you're taking his class? Check out the way he makes every statement like it's a question. Hilarious" (Carter post).

Timothy Stobierski wrote:

4) The reason you don't have any good English students this semester is because I only recommended you to my science-major friends. Students talk with each other about professors before they pick their next semester's classes. Oh, so you're going to make us buy 16 books and then only use three in class? And you're going to shoot down every thought challenging your own interpretation of a text? You're going to be narrow-minded and dismiss your students as having nothing to contribute to discussions? OK, that's fine. Just don't complain when you have a bunch of bio students and engineers in your class trying to fulfill the one Lit Requirement in their gen-eds. "They can't write an introduction to save their lives?" you say? Too bad. You don't deserve those of us who care (Stobierski post).

Then, of course, the readers responded, with hundreds of comments, most of them attacking the students for their shallowness and superficiality. Though some went after Barreca as well (all typos and misspellings in the original):

The bottom-line fault here doesn't lie with the callow youths in Prof. Barreca's class, though; it lies with Prof. Barreca, who gave this rigorless, gossip-girl, diss of an assignment and then, like the parent who sticks undistinguished kiddie art on the fridge for the the neighbors to admire, put the jejeune, ageist, sexist (well, Timbo's anyway), CW-network-quality, Valley Girl essayettes out in public. What'd she expect, legions of cheerleading michygearys to sing a unanimous chorus of praise? (Blog comment).

I then decided to use Barreca's prompt as an in-class writing assignment. The responses I got were similar to Barreca's in their superficiality, though not in their intensity (perhaps because I made clear my disapproval of the borderline misogyny of Barreca's student Stobierski). The personal appearance of professors came in for criticism, especially professors with sweat-stained or -smelling clothes. Also strongly condemned were professors who rely too heavily on PowerPoint presentations, or who were just generally boring lecturers. What I found most interesting was their reaction to the readers' comments: they were offended. My students felt that the readers, most of whom they assumed were professors, were out of line in criticizing Barreca's students.

As noted, many of the readers' comments were indeed angry and aggressive. This sort of anger and aggression was even more apparent in the responses I found to a blogger who calls himself Ragingwildflower. RW, a student at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, claimed in a blogpost last January that his rights had been violated when he was kicked out of a class for texting. He claimed that he had a right to text in class whenever he felt like

it, and that he was gathering up signatures on a petition to allow texting in classrooms. An education blog, rateyourstudents.com, picked up and reposted RW's blog, and RW was inundated and overwhelmed with harshly critical commentary. Many of the comments were personal and foul, some tried to argue with him logically (how is texting a *right?*), and some just dismissed him as a spoiled and petulant child. Reading the posts, my students acknowledged the stupidity of RW's "argument" (though perhaps they were humoring me, since I have a well-deserved reputation for removing texting students from my classrooms) but they were once again offended by the attacks on RW, especially the comments that RW was spoiled and privileged.

Anecdotally, at least, there seems to be a wild disconnect between how students see the educational process and themselves, and how educators see these things. The website that popularized Ragingwildflower's blog, rateyourstudents.com, is notorious for its continuing smackdown of spoiled, over-privileged, do-nothing, lazy students—students derisively dismissed as "snowflakes." Founded in 2003 as a response to ratemyprofessor.com, RYS has expanded over the years from extreme criticism of students to extreme criticism of higher education in general. I often find the level of anger expressed there astonishing—anger at bad students, certainly, but also at good students ("keeners"), administrators ("admin-flakes"), older professors ("silverbacks"), and graduate students ("grad-flakes"). About the only personal category that escapes general condemnation are adjuncts—though, of course, there are individual complaints about adjuncts whose behavior is "flakey." A recent post on bad students is typical:

Fuck it, I'm done. I started teaching because I love my subject and wanted to teach it to students who might also be interested in it and had chosen to take my subject (yes, you guys CHOOSE to take the class) but teaching these classes has become very similar to trying to feed a fussy baby. Even when you finally get the spoon into its mouth it just ends up spitting up on you most the time (RYS).

There often seems a danger that the anonymous writers at RYS also too often fall into the consumerist view of education, that the students are to them nothing more than objects—and defective objects, at that. This view of students is developed in Mark Bauerlein's 2008 book, *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*. Bauerlein, an English professor at Emory University (and, like a Barreca, a blogger for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*), claims that contemporary American culture has produced a generation of young people too stupid to even look into a boot, much less pour something out of it. Bauerlein spends much of the book quoting various studies documenting the decline of time young people spend reading, and the increase of time they spend staring into screens. He argues that the “abundant material progress in an adolescent's life hasn't merely bypassed or disengaged him or her from intellectual progress, but has, perhaps, hindered it” (36).

It's a new attitude, this brazen disregard of books and reading. Earlier generations resented homework assignments, of course, and only a small segment of each dove into the intellectual currents of the time, but no generation has

trumpeted a-literacy (knowing how to read, but choosing not to), as a valid behavior of their peers (40).

Bauerlein does not offer any solutions to this problem, which he blames partly on technology (“print can never compete with a screen”) and with parental coddling. Neither does he offer any advice to educators dealing with privileged, a-literate students. Nor does he analyze the effects a-literacy may have on the changing American university. Both Bauerlein’s book and rateyourstudents.com constitute, I think, a pushback against the effects of consumerism and corporatism in the academy—though I fear they are but rearguard actions that will not stop the ongoing withering of the university.

Donoghue and Tuchman and Bauerlein, along the writers at rateyourstudents.com and all the commenters on all the blogs seemingly join together in offering a grim vision of the university present and its future. Yet the state and fate of the university have largely escaped representation in contemporary fiction, despite the numerous novels and stories that have over the years been set on college campuses. I find this odd, since it seems to me that the possibilities that the present-day campus offers writers as a region or place where things happen are tremendous.

In a recent analysis of late 20th century American fiction, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*, Mark McGurl says that

The campus or classroom is...a kind of geographical space, however small, and to contextualize a literary work in relation to one can be as telling as connecting it to the global cultural flow (McGurl 401).

It is interesting to note, then, that in light of the problems facing higher education, and the potential for using the campus as a literary location, most fictional portrayals of college life focus on the farcical. McGurl says

The postwar campus novel is most often written from the perspective of the faculty, taking as its focus one or another ludicrous dimension of departmental life, and almost always portraying literary scholars as the petty, cynical idiots we are. At its best, the genre of the campus novel capitalizes on the resemblance between a college campus and a small village, deploying its relative social coherence and richly articulated social-professional hierarchies in a revivification of the gossipy comedy of manners (47).

In her analysis of academic fiction, *Faculty Towers*, Elaine Showalter says that in the university there are two stories—those of the faculty and those of the students (121). Most academic novels concentrate on the faculty, leaving the students as flat, stock characters, as objects of transgressive sexual lusts, or both. A very common plot in contemporary academic novels is the plot of sexual harassment: a middle-aged (male) professor is caught in a sexual relationship with a student; and is punished. Taken too far, however, the interest in collegiate sex burdens a book rather than enlivens it, as in Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* and Francine Prose's *Blue Angel*.

Focusing on the lives of undergraduates in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, Wolfe presents the students of elite DuPont University as a pack of rutting priapetic sex fiends, obsessed

(when they're not having sex) with status and popular culture. The plot follows the title character, arriving on campus from a small Appalachian town, as she attempts to maintain her virtue in this lust-filled environment. Though critics often poked fun at Wolfe's emphasis on sex—a 70-year old man writing about the sex lives of 20-year olds—the real problem of *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is not the number of orgasms per page, but the essentially monotone portrayal of college students as people defined by nothing more than genitals and possessions. In *Blue Angel*, Prose presents a more conventional sex tale, the story of a creative writing professor who becomes enamored—or obsessed, or something—with a troubled student. Predictably, this turns out badly for all concerned. In both Wolfe and Prose, sexual encounters come off as unpleasant and unfunny, and both books exude a sort of lugubrious lubricity.

Showalter explains the emphasis on collegiate sex by saying that “Overall, the daily life of a professor is not good narrative material” (121). Writing, teaching, researching, attending endless meetings—these everyday tasks might seem to offer little drama. However, since fiction concerns itself with the extraordinary—that is, something that happens to someone—a skilled or insightful writer should be able to find a way to create a readable yet realistic academic setting that touches upon the problems that Donoghue and Tuchman describe. Showalter recognizes both the ubiquity of the collegiate sex romp and its limitations, and suggests that what is needed in academic fiction is a “...more historical view, a viewpoint that accepts the decline in the ideals of the academy while acknowledging the inevitability of such transformations within institutions” (121).

One novel which anticipates Donoghue and Tuchman is *The Lecturer's Tale*, by James Hynes. Published in 2001, this novel chronicles the career of Nelson Humboldt, a (white,

male) untenured lecturer, and his remarkable rise to power, through occult means, in a highly politicized English Department. In the end, Humboldt's university is destroyed and privatized by the state, and the formerly prestigious University of the Midwest becomes "Midwestern™ A Harbridge Company," with the motto, "We're Midwestern™—If We Don't Teach It, You Don't Need to Know It" (376). But Hynes provides a twist to the corporatizing of the university, for under the new regime the standard of living for non-tenured instructors actually improves:

...the few remaining professors with any ambition at all jumped to Hamilton Groves Community College. But Nelson and his cadre of classroom-hardened comp teachers found themselves uniquely suited to the new way of doing things. The corporate salary was actually better than the old university salary for comp teachers; year-to-year contracts were better than semester-to-semester; and Harbridge, *mirabile dictu*, actually provided benefits, sick days and vacation time (376).

"Cash," one composition teacher tells Humboldt, "is better than tenure" (377). The remaining instructors are there at Midwestern™ to teach, and teach only, but Hynes provides a spot of hope amid the corporate university. The novel ends with Humboldt facing a group of bored students, armed with nothing more than a battered copy of *David Copperfield*.

Is this enough? he wondered, staring at the creased paper cover of the Penguin. Is that all that these kids need, is a book? I'll never know...and that's the hard truth of teaching. It's also, he reminded himself, the glory of it (386).

A less-successful novel in this vein is *Home*, by Hazard Adams. Also published in 2001, *Home* is the story of Edward Williams, a history professor at “State University” in Washington, who has been brought in by the Dean of Liberal Arts to participate in an evaluation of the English Department. At the same time, Williams pursues his own research into a turn-of-the-20th-century anarchist commune, and the commune is contrasted with the department: the commune faced antagonism and strife from surrounding communities, and the department is faced with internal antagonism and strife as it attempts to make an appointment to an endowed chair, find a new department head, and deal with a possible case of sexual harassment. Despite the presence of the usual academic suspects—earnest liberal, closeted gay, conflicted lesbian, strident feminist, wry poet—and reasonable amounts of conflict, the novel is ultimately a failure. The characters never emerge from their stick-figure existence, and the book as a whole is more of a semi-polemical sigh of disappointment over political correctness and culture wars than it is a real novel. Adams seems to be asking, “Why can’t we all get along?”—seemingly unaware that “getting along” leads to dull, uninspiring fiction.

More expansive views of the university are offered by Jane Smiley in *Moo* and by Vance Bourjaily in *Now Playing at Canterbury*. (Interestingly in terms of regionalism, though no doubt coincidentally, both novels are set at large state universities in Iowa). In *Moo*, Smiley tries to depict the size and power of “Moo U,” a major agricultural university,

with its intricate connection to the corporate world and the community, with its rivalries between departments, and the interactions (not all sexual) between faculty and students. In *Now Playing at Canterbury*, a group of actors and singers gather at State University, in State City, Iowa, to perform an opera created by a pair of faculty members. The librettist, an English professor, wanders across campus prior to the start of rehearsals and considers the sheer size of the university:

The library, with its half-million books—and if they don’t include one he might need, a special librarian knows how to get it from Harvard or Oxford or Roberts college, Istanbul. The Engineering Building, and in it the university radio station, broadcasting intelligent talk and serious music anytime you’re lonely for such sounds. This ivory tower, covered with graffiti, scarred by rebellion, still stands, has survived to 1972, will stand, is still ivory as a carved tusk is till ivory...Classroom halls, Physics Building, dormitories, hospital complex, Memorial Union with its hotel and cafeterias, tennis courts, stadium, soccer fields, Center for Asian Studies, Center for...two hundred million dollars’ worth of grounds and buildings...for everything from majorettes to anesthesiologists, etchers to wrestling coaches. They come to State City. To learn something. Or achieve something. Or wonder at something (6).

Both Smiley and Bourjaily offer far more optimistic (and idealistic) views of the university than the ones offered by Donoghue or Tuchman, or even, in the end, Hynes. They imply, I think, the size, complexity, and power of the modern university. They seem

to see the university not as an isolated, insular place cut off from what is too often insultingly called “the real world,” but as a true microcosm of American society, with all the politics, sex, and absurdity that entails. Even if Donoghue is correct, and the postmodern corporate-state university succeeds in purging itself of the Humanities, the absolute power and complexity of the university will continue; the university will remain a place, a location, in which people enact their lives. What I’ve tried to do in *The Last Educations* is depict those lives.

Regional Literatures and Southwestern Literatures

In a recent profile of Texas Governor Rick Perry, journalist Robert Draper quotes the governor as saying:

“I think it was Sheridan that said, ‘If I owned hell and Texas, I would rent out Texas and live in hell.’ I mean, this was a really hard place. You look at the men that founded it — the Bowies and the Trattles, even Sam Houston. . . I don’t think Texas becomes an urbany, really highly cultured place until like the last decade”
(MM30)

This is in many ways a remarkable statement. Perry is acknowledging fundamental changes in the nature of the state, recognizing that the Texas of today is different from the Texas of the past: it’s “urbany” and “highly cultured,” and, Perry seems to imply, *softer*. Old Texas was a hard place, led by hard men. Now it’s different. Perry here is conceding a condition that the larger, popular culture has been slow to accept: that for three generations, Texas has been an urban state, not a rural state, and is an increasingly

ethnically diverse one. This condition raises problems and opportunities for writers and educators: how can this emerging, changing region best be depicted and understood? Though the immediate setting for *The Last Education* is the university campus, the campus is also somewhere, a place within a larger place—Austin, Texas—and the larger, more general place has an impact on the course of the narrative.

I define a regional work of literature is one in which place—generally, geographic place—assumes a dynamic role in the construction of narrative, and has a significant impact on the characters and themes of the work. Mark McGurl argues that regionalism has provided writers with a variety of rhetorical appeals:

Categories that more obviously split the national culture into smaller units are an easier sell for high cultural prestige leading to inclusion in the syllabus of post-war literature...though it is a typically less fraught form of identity in the postwar period than an ethnic or racial one, a regional identity still enables a form of alignment by analogy with the dominant form of the aesthetic appreciation of difference (59).

Though I think it is also apparent that “form[s] of alignment” also carry with them elements of conflict, the constant push and pull of power and authority that occur between individuals and other individuals, between individuals and factions, between sections and sections, between state governments and the federal government, between different racial and ethnic groups, and so forth. This various and ever-changing conflict—these conflicts—lie at the heart of the American experience. Individuals may be counted

simultaneously among several groups, adding a level of internal conflict mirroring larger external conflicts.

At the same time, it seems to me that inclusiveness through difference can be a primary goal of the fiction writer: practical inclusiveness, as in enlarging audiences and affecting the lives of readers, as well as thematic inclusiveness, pertaining to a more or less common humanity. Difference, whether ethnic or geographic, is easily defined in its opposition to the larger—and, presumably, blander—whole. McGurl says:

Regionalist fiction has always been cultural pluralist in the sense that it is a form of appreciation of diversity within a larger national whole... (59).

At the same time, I would argue that the definition of “regional” should be broadened to include not just vast geographic areas but also localities: neighborhoods, communities, institutions, even the human body itself. A modern regional literature can be situated—simultaneously, if the author desires—in any number of overlapping places, drawing narrative strength from each place’s individuality and difference. Some would disagree with me: poet Stephen C. Behrendt, who is from Wisconsin and now lives in Nebraska, argues that categorizing writers is foolish, pointing out that writers from Nebraska could be considered writers of the Great Plains, as could many Canadian writers; but Nebraska writers aren’t Canadian, and Canadian writers aren’t Nebraskans.

I illustrate some of the difficulties of nomenclature by asking what we do with a writer like Flannery O’Connor. Where—in *terms of curricular categories*—do

we put her? Does she go into “Literature of the South” or “Women’s Literature”?

What about Alice Walker: “Southern”? “Woman”? “African American”? (154)

For me, the answer is pretty obvious: Yes. The most interesting aspect of studying literature from a regional perspective is placing writers in various “curricular categories” to see what commonalities emerge—or don’t. Everyone, and every narrative, is a product of multiple regions, factions, or groups.

McGurl identifies two main strains of American literary regionalism: Midwestern Regionalism and Southern Regionalism (132). He argues that Midwestern Regionalism is based on the ethos of the pioneer, and is expansive and technologically-oriented, and that Southern Regionalism is based on the tradition of the planter, and is traditional and limiting.

Neither of these two traditions can wholly account for a regionalism that describes Texas and the Southwest, a region I feel has more in common with the West and the frontier than with the Midwest and South. According to Richard Slotkin in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in 20th Century America*, the mythology of the frontier is derived from a “complex of traditional ideas” that had been part of America since its earliest days, including

...the concept of pioneering as a defining national mission, a “Manifest Destiny,” and a vision of the western settlements as a refuge from tyranny and oppression, a safety valve for metropolitan malcontents, a land of golden opportunity for

enterprising individualists, and an inexhaustible reservoir of natural wealth on which a future of limitless prosperity could be based (30).

By “golden opportunity,” Slotkin is referring—ironically, I think—to popular conceptions of pioneering—earnest sodbusters moseying west in their Conestoga wagons with a vague goal of improving their lives and civilizing the new lands—as well the way that the new lands were advertised and marketed by large landholders such as banks and railroads. It’s a grim irony, for in most cases the golden opportunity didn’t pan out, in reality or in literature. Farming was a grueling way of making a living, and many failed at it, becoming tenant farmers, drifting farmhands, or joining “metropolitan malcontents” looking for work in the booming industrial cities. The works of Frank Norris, William Dean Howells, and, above all, Hamlin Garland, depict the bleak and often brutish world of the post-pioneering era of the late 19th century.

In Texas the Myth of the Frontier developed a little differently, in some ways almost completely avoiding the 19th century ideal of “progress.” The inherited culture of violence was more extreme in Texas than in the other states of the Union, beginning with the Texas war of independence from Mexico (a war whose signature moment was not victory at San Jacinto but defeat at the Alamo), participation in the US Civil War, and the long frontier wars against the Comanche. And even following the end of the official wars, Texas remained an internally violent place, with what amounted to ethnic cleansings against Mexicans in South Texas, and against blacks in the upper Brazos Valley. There was mob violence: Texas averaged a lynching approximately every ten days for a period of some 50 years. Murder rates were consistently high, as were suicide rates. The Texas myth that

developed in the early 20th century celebrated the freedom and independence of the cowboy and the open range, but also revered authority and force. At the same time, the Texas myth derived in many ways from the state's Confederate, cotton-growing, slave-owning past: the past of the planter, a traditional past that in turn combined with a different tradition, one of cattle and horses, of ranch life and of intimate contact with the older cultures of Mexico.

This myth—that of the cowboy and the open range—is something that most people are familiar with. It is based on traditions of land and nature, and ignores most of the negative aspects of the violent past. Developed in the late 19th century, drawing from what I refer to as undermyths—Mexico, Native Americans, African-Americans, and the defeated Confederacy—the Texas myth was popularized in the early 20th century through books and films, through radio and television programs, and has been enormously appealing and enduring. The most significant literary practitioners of the myth were J. Frank Dobie, Roy Bedichek, and Walter Prescott Webb. Dobie's work focused on a celebration and romanticization of the past, a vision of Texas as a special place, settled and inhabited by special people. A prolific writer, author of books and magazine articles and newspaper columns and radio commentaries, known in his lifetime as "Mr. Texas," Dobie concentrated his energies writing about the state's frontier/ranching heritage, on the state's land, on its nature. In this work he was joined by his close friends, Roy Bedichek, author of *Adventures with a Texas Naturalist*, and by Walter Prescott Webb, author of *The Great Plains* and *The Texas Rangers*. Dobie, Bedichek, and Webb held a culturally conservative view of the past and were hugely influential in establishing and maintaining the popular romantic conceptions of Texas.

Yet while the state around Dobie transformed itself through urbanism and industrialism, he remained stuck in the past. Dobie was apparently aware of the stuckness of his traditionalism: John Graves argues at length that Dobie understood—but still avoided addressing—the conflict inherent in his writing, the conflict between an idealized past and the grim modern present. “Dobie’s personal background,” Graves says, “...kept a strong and discomforting grip on him as he grew older” (21). In a letter to Roy Bedichek, Dobie said:

I am too damned ignorant to be effective in writing about the realities of the present. That is what comes of having spent nearing a quarter of a century of my allotted years in doing nothing but soak in the lore of coyotes and cowboys (quoted in Graves 21).

Despite this glimmer of self-awareness, Dobie’s work for the entirety of his life was resistant to the 20th Century and modernity.

Rebuttals to Dobie’s antiquarian and romantic views of Texas have been given by novelist Larry McMurtry. In two essays, “Southwestern Literature?,” published in 1968, and “Ever a Bridegroom,” published in 1981, McMurtry not only attacked Dobie and Bedichek and Webb, but also the writers they influenced, arguing that Texas writers needed to turn their attentions away from the traditional and rural to the modern and urban:

Texas writers have paid too much attention to nature, not enough to human nature, and they have been too ready to fall back on the bucolic memoir or country idyll rather than attempting novels, poems, and dramas (Bridegroom 8).

McMurtry argues that urban life offers writers “richer possibilities” than does the countryside or the past (Bridegroom 10). What McMurtry is looking for are novels of manners, depicting the cultural collisions and casual conflicts of the contemporary world. McMurtry condemns writers who stick to writing about the past again and again: “...too many [Texas writers] love repeating themselves—after all, it’s easier than thinking of something new to say” (Bridegroom 11). He also comes out in favor of the death of the cowboy—or, at least, in favor of the death of the depiction of the cowboy.

...It’s easier to write about the old folks, the cowboy, or the small town, than to deal with the more immediate and frequently less simplistic experience of city life.

What this amounts to is intellectual laziness. Most Texas writers only know one trick, and seem determined to keep from learning another. The result is a limited, shallow, self-repetitious literature which has so far failed completely to do justice to the complexities of life in the state (Bridegroom 11).

This, of course, from an extraordinarily prolific writer who has, since this essay was written, published two or three shelves worth of books dealing with the country, and with cowboys and the frontier.

What's striking to me now as I re-read "Ever a Bridegroom" is how very white it is. Writers, urban or rural, are assumed to be Anglo. Of course, historically, Texas writers have been overwhelmingly white and almost exclusively male. There were a few exceptions: the black folklorist Mason Brewer, a protégé of Dobie's, and the almost-forgotten African-American writer Sutton Griggs, author of the 1901 novel *Imperium in Imperio*, an oddball fantasy about a black takeover of Texas, masterminded by a secret society meeting in caverns beneath Waco. Also escaping McMurtry's notice were prominent Latino writers such as Americo Paredes. But what's really missing is any idea that the Anglo domination of Texas was in any way threatened, that within a generation, demographic changes would move whites to a non-majority status; and, of course, McMurtry offers no speculation on what those changing demographics might mean for his dream of an urban Texas literature.

Well, 29 years have passed. Prominent African-Texan writers include J. California Cooper (*The Future Has a Past*) and Attica Locke (*Black Water Rising*), and there are many Latino writers, including Dagoberto Gilb (*The Last Residence of Mickey Acuna*), Sandra Cisneros (*Caramello*), Oscar Casares (*Brownsville; Amigoland*), and Christine Granados (*Brides and Sinners in El Chuco*). The works of these writers engage in what McGurl called the "aesthetic appreciation of difference," establishing a dialog in which the established Texas myth of the past is often confronted and examined in the light of contemporary reality.

At the same time, the cowboy books—the books of Texas past—are still out there. A few years ago, I was at a conference panel dealing with Texas literature that was moderated by a pair of professors from Texas State University. Most of the discussion

centered on the historical novels of McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy. When I asked about writers of contemporary, urban Texas, one of the professors urged me to read Stephen Harrigan's historical novel, *Gates of the Alamo*. Perhaps "contemporary" is a matter of perspective.

It is clear, McMurtry wrote years ago, that "the death of the cowboy and the end of the rural way of life [have] been lamented sufficiently..." (Bridegroom 9). While McMurtry, in his long and prolific career, has written many books set in the modern urban Southwest (*Some Can Whistle, The Desert Rose, Terms of Endearment*), he is best known for his books of the retreating past, through books that tell of the death of it (*Horseman, Pass By*) or attempt to refashion it in a darker and less romantic shade of gold (*Streets of Laredo*). In these attempts his work parallels that of Cormac McCarthy, who has also written of the end of the west (*All the Pretty Horses*) and has revised it (*Blood Meridian*). Many of these books are of a very high quality indeed, but the focus on the past becomes a bit numbing after a while. McMurtry got it mostly right back in 1981: post-mythic urban reality is where literature should go.

One Texas novel which is seldom mentioned in Tex-lit roundups is James Michener's *Texas*. Published in 1984, it is a typical Michener novel, a vast, rangy long-scoped view of a particular place, and it is sadly typical late-Michener in that for long periods all "writing" per se ceases and is replaced with vast dumps of non-narrative information. Nonetheless, I found one character's line from that novel to be very memorable: "...Texas has always been a neurotic place, a breeding ground for anomie" (345). Indeed, this line resonated with me so much that I used it for the epigraph of my MA thesis, *Either Side of a Line*.

The narrative context of the line finds it being delivered by an academic to an audience composed of stereotypical Texans of the period—a rich, buffoonish rancher; a rich, cold, and calculating high-tech tycoon; a rich, prissy member of the Daughters of the Texas Revolution; and several earnest academics and bureaucratic functionaries—who have gathered together to find appropriate ways to honor the upcoming Texas sesquicentennial. The panel is, of course, offended by the line, even after the academic presents historical evidence of Texas anomie and neurosis. I think it's clear that this reading of Texas has had an important influence on my work; certainly my previous books, intended to depict urban Texas, are filled with characters whose values are more or less in conflict with the values of the larger culture and who are more or less neurotic to their cores; and all deal with the effects of anomie in one form or another. In fact, I'd argue that most urban Texas books do: what can be more anomic than living in a busy multicultural city whose culture ceaselessly valorizes a golden Anglo frontier past?

My favorite among the Texas urban books is one of the earlier ones: *The Gay Place*, by Billy Lee Brammer. Published in 1961 and subtitled "Being Three Related Novels," I see it more as a short novel, "The Flea Circus," sharing a volume with two novellas, "Room Enough to Caper," and "Country Pleasures." All three works form a long, composite novel, united by theme, setting, and central characters—the political scene of Austin, and the book's powerful governor, Arthur Fenstermaker. Fenstermaker is a dominating presence—colorful, shrewd, loud, and overbearing. In an early scene, Fenstermaker is having breakfast with a butler in attendance.

...The Governor turned through the newspapers, talking but not looking up.

“You think it’s getting better?”

“What’s that?”

“Bein’ a colored man. You think it’s any better?”

The butler looked at him desperately. “I got a good job,” he said.

The Governor did not seem to pay attention. He went on talking and turning pages. “Maybe a little better, I guess...discussions goin’ on...Least that’s not like it used to be. Hell! I remember old Pitchfork Ben Tillman—the *things* he said...” Fenstermaker broke off momentarily, peering at the newsprint, then went on: “Of course bein’ better still don’t make it very good. I was thinking yesterday, signing my mail, how I’d feel if I wrote a public official about, you know, my rights? I was lookin’ over what I’d been sayin’. ‘Well now this sure is a problem, involvin’ grave emotional questions, and we can’t tolerate havin’ second-class citizens in this free country and I’m sure gonna do what I can...Try to make reasonable progress toward a solution...Sure keep your views in mind...’ Why, *God damn!* Some cornpone Buddha say that to *me*, I’d set a bomb off under him” (11-12).

The three works are wildly inconsistent, and “Room Enough to Caper,” and “Country Pleasures” have never been able to hold my attention for very long. The best of the three, however, “The Flea Circus,” I have always found to be a small jewel of a narrative.

The plot of “The Flea Circus” follows Roy Sherwood, a lackadaisical state legislator, as he is drafted by Fenstermaker to push a bill through the house; Sherwood, though, is preoccupied with his own laziness and indolence, and with an affair he’s conducting with a

colleague's wife. Yet Roy's life is a reflection of the setting of Austin (or, more exactly, Austin as it was), a slow sleepy city moving to the seasonal rhythms of the university and the biennial meetings of the legislature. Everyone has time in this narrative: time to plot, drink, sleep around, backstab, to engage in folly, to live out what sleepy destinies await them; no one, except perhaps Fenstermaker, is in a hurry.

He dialed another number on the phone and waited during the six or seven rings. He pressed the disconnect and dialed again. After another interval, Roy Sherwood answered.

"What're you doing?" Fenstermaker boomed.

"Sleeping," Roy Sherwood said. "Real good, too."

"Hell of a note," Fenstermaker said. "World's cavin' in all round us; rocket ships blasting off to the moon; poisonous gas in our environment...Sinful goddamn nation...laden with inequity, offspring of evildoers. My princes are rebels and companions of thieves..."

"What?"

"...A horror and a hissing..."

"Who the hell is this?"

"Isaiah," Fenstermaker said. "The Prophet Isaiah."

"I'm going to hang up in about three seconds," Roy said, "but first I'd really like to know who the hell this is."

"Arthur Goddam Fenstermaker. Hah yew?" (17)

I first read *The Gay Place* in 1979, soon after I moved to Texas, and I was struck then—and I remain struck—by the rhythms of the text, and how those rhythms reflected the city I found myself in. The book was not a dreary, dreamy elegy for a lost past, it was a book about a place that was real, that existed in the more or less present. Needless to say, Frank Dobie hated it:

Not a character in the thick novel who is not cheap...We are in the middle of politics for 175,000 words and nobody actually every (sic) does anything but drink and drink & drink to boredom & screw, & screw & screw to death—the great governor’s climax. I expected some inside views and a little wisdom at least (quoted in Graham xxvi).²

This in spite of the fact that Brammer opens the book—anchors it—with a long description of the land, looking back to the past—to a hard world, indeed.

The country is barbarously large and final. It is too much country—boondock country—alternately drab and dazzling, spectral and remote. It is so wrongfully muddled and various that it is difficult to conceive of it as all of a piece. Though it begins simply enough, as a part of the other (3).

I wonder now if *The Gay Place*—and “The Flea Circus” in particular—actually reflected Austin as I saw it, or if the book has shaped my vision and memory of it. There

² I used this quote—cleaned up a little by my publisher—as one of the epigraphs for my novel, *That Demon Life*.

is no way of knowing for sure. The city that existed in the late seventies is definitely gone, and I attempt to write about the place I see and know, a dynamic place that lives in the present but indeed has a past, a past that extends back through the cowboys and the Comanche, all the way back to place flooded by a shallow inland sea inhabited by swimming dinosaurs. I see place as a palimpsest, something you can read layer after layer, something that can be understood and maybe explained.

But does contemporary Texas need a literature that attempts to explain it? Works that take notice of the technological and demographic changes taking place in the state, along with an awareness of the past, that acknowledge the discontinuity between myth and reality? McGurl says that Midwestern Regionalism dissipated: in its pioneer nature, it moved West, leaving the physical Midwest behind, and through technology it simply became less dependent on place. “Given these opposing differences, it is perhaps predictable that the ‘Midwestern’ soon weakened as a meaningful contemporary regionalism in American culture” (151). It’s possible that something similar could happen to Texas literature.

In my consideration of Texas writing and how it does and does not reflect the changes taking place in the state, I began giving more and more thought to the work of Gertrude Beasley. A native of West Texas, and an almost exact contemporary of Dobie, Beasley is nearly unknown to the general public. Her memoir, *My First 30 Years*, was first published by Robert McAlmon in Paris in 1925; because of its explicit language and raw scenes of frontier sex, customs officials seized and destroyed most copies imported into the United States. It is unclear whether Dobie ever read Beasley. McCarthy, known for his deep

research, probably has; McMurtry certainly has (he wrote the introduction to a 1989 reprint of the book). Her memoir has one of the most riveting beginnings in Texas letters:

Thirty years ago I lay in the womb of a woman, conceived in a sexual act of rape, being carried during the prenatal period by an unwilling and rebellious mother, finally bursting from the womb only to be tormented in a family whose members I despised or pitied, and brought into contact with people I should never have chosen. Sometimes I wish that, as I lay in the womb, a pink soft embryo, I had somehow thought, breathed, or moved and wrought destruction to the woman who bore me, and her eight miserable children who preceded me, and the four round-faced mediocrities who came after me, and her husband, a monstrously cruel, Christ-like, and handsome man with an animal's appetite for begetting children (1).

Here, I think, is an introduction to the hard Texas Rick Perry so wistfully recalls, the hard Texas romanticized by Dobie, the hard Texas that McCarthy and McMurtry attempt to reinvent. Beasley's voice is one that speaks across the years—direct, pained, angry, and kind of crazy. Though the novellas comprising *The Last Educations* would be properly called post-mythic urban reality, I would like to think that they carry forward into a changing world an awareness of the hard past, the world in which Beasley and others lived.

The Last Educations

The Last Educations is composed of three interlocking novellas: "Fate," "The Consolations of Empire," and "Incomplete." These three works were designed from the beginning to be novellas; they are not short stories that got out of control or novels that

sputtered out. I began the first of them, “Fate,” because I was interested in the form, and this interest intensified as I began writing the other two, as I began drawing on my reading of novella theory and developing my own ideas of compositional space. The three novellas are bound together by several characters who appear in each one, and, more importantly, they are bound together by place: Austin, Texas, and a large university much like the University of Texas. All three use informal, first-person narrators, have plots built around unexpected or extraordinary events, and they all deal thematically with individual responses to societal and institutional change.

In the overall imagining and writing of the novellas, I was influenced by Robert Olen Butler’s *From Where You Dream: The Process of Writing Fiction*. Butler uses a method he calls “dreamstorming,” where the writer intensively visualizes the story he or she is preparing to write, focusing on aspects of plot and character, and especially on the solid, sensuous details that can—or will—ground each scene in verisimilitude. As the scenic details began coming together, I made notes in notebooks, just simple bullet points of what I wanted to happen, loosely organized more or less in the order I thought they should occur. Then I transferred the bullet-point notes to 5x8-inch notecards, one point to a card. I then used the points as prompts, and wrote the first drafts of the novellas on the notecards. For the first major revision, I re-wrote the note-carded narrative into the spiral-bound notebook, and for the second major revision, I typed the notebook narrative into my computer. Subsequent revisions took place on the computer, or on printed copies of the narrative. I followed this method pretty closely for “Fate” and “The Consolations of Empire,” and a little more loosely for “Incomplete.” Though in the retelling, this method perhaps sounds a little formal and stilted, it was in practice quite flexible. I never felt

wholly bound by the notecard prompts—they were imaginative suggestions to keep me moving, not sticky, heavy, concrete-filled commands. They acted more like the white lines on the right-hand side of a highway: guidelines to keep me headed toward my destination, especially on a foggy night, and kept me safely out of the ditch.

The idea behind “Fate” came from a friend of mine who was pursuing an MFA at a university in North Carolina. She got a job feeding the cats of one of her professors, and the professor sent her an elaborate and absurd list of the cats’ feeding requirements. I told her, “There’s a story there—write it.” She said something like, “It’s a stupid story—and besides, I’m a memoirist. You write it.” I took that as sort of a challenge—especially since someone had told me that there were too many animals in my fiction. I decided I wanted to write the best animal story—the best critter story—ever.

But first, of course, I needed a character, a protagonist, someone I could build a tale of cat-feeding around. A graduate student, I thought at first—then a post-doc, someone who was stressed-out, conflicted, desperate, and self-hating. The character of Tom Holt began to take form, and the narrative around him became a comic story of self-loathing.

“Fate” as it came to be imagined, written, and revised, tells the story of Holt, a post-doc/adjunct who feels trapped and overwhelmed, teaching six sections of composition and intro to literature, splitting his time between the big university and the local community college. A former professor of Holt’s, Camille Braddock, asks him to feed her cats while she is out of town; constitutionally unable to say “No” to anyone, Holt is now burdened with another responsibility. At the same time, Holt is forced to deal with an angry ex-girlfriend and a cheating student. “Fate” depicts a protagonist trapped in a role, in an institution, that is totally unsuited for his personality. Holt is stuck in his hell of

lecturedom, beaten down by the system and by his own failings, and left with conflicted feelings of awe and jealousy at the lives of full-time faculty.

Dr. Braddock's desk faced the door, and beyond it was a window—a window! My office, if you could even call it that, was stuck in the dark basement of the undergraduate library, a dank cubicle I shared with a pair of adjuncts from the Spanish department and a leaky sewage pipe. Dr. Braddock's office was big and dry and had a window. Life on the tenure track! I almost felt like crying (??).

The plot, as it develops, follows Holt's attempt to juggle the demands placed on him—teaching, grading, looking for a tenure-track job, scrambling to pay bills, dealing with a cheating student. The problem with the cheating student is particularly troubling for Holt, for not only does this force him to do more work, he also has to face his...attraction to the student.

“Well,” I said. “The CSP said 77% of your essay was plagiarized.”

“Jeeze!”

“So I had to go show it to my boss.”

“But I sent you the right paper today—that first one was a mistake.”

“And I believe you,” I said. I wanted to believe her, at least. Yeah. I took a deep breath, looked at her. Looked her in the eye. “I totally believe you.” I remembered the soft-looking inside of her thigh on that first day of class, those

tight yellow shorts—it seemed like yesterday, staring at a pretty girl on a hot summer afternoon. The pretty girl standing here in front of me.

“Listen,” I suddenly said, “we should probably get together at some point and talk about this, you know?”

What happens here, of course, is a forbidden faculty-student relationship. (Though it’s more of a hook-up than a relationship). But I have in my other works depicted sex as a ridiculous and absurd urge that places my characters in comic situations, and that’s what I was trying to do with Holt in “Fate”—place him in the middle of an act of reckless and lustful stupidity.

Another aim of the narrative I imagined was to create a character who was essentially unlikable and then get the reader to feel at least some sympathy for him. Holt, overworked and overwhelmed, is unlikable in his helplessness. He cuts corners in his teaching and grading, he doesn’t pay his debts, he has sex with at least one student (with the implication that he might have done that before), and he is a self-justifying thief.

I wrote the figures on a file card, then folded it up and put it in my billfold to remind me of my foolishness, my stupidity, my lack of a backbone—my inability to say No. The next day, when I went downstairs to clean the litter boxes, I came back up the stairs with a couple of those unopened, never-read rhetoric texts—*Everything’s An Argument* and the sixth edition of *The Bedford Handbook*. Sold them that afternoon for \$35. The way I looked at it, Dr. Braddock still owed me about \$1100.

This is rather a feeble justification for dishonesty, and I think Holt is aware of it. Like almost any other narrative, Holt's life continues after the narrative stops, and his life is different because of it. Holt has gained a little bit of self-awareness, and if by the end of "Fate" he rejects personal change, he may at some point embrace it. Or not.

In the fall of 2007, I attended the annual conference of the Western Literature Association, which was meeting in Tacoma, Washington. While there I met a guy who had accompanied his WLA member wife to the conference, and he told me that he had been married to three English professors in his life. That encounter was the seed crystal for "The Consolations of Empire": a guy who was attracted to English professors.

In my original imaginings, it became the story of Camille Braddock, the cat-owning professor from "Fate," and her lawyer boyfriend. The boyfriend would be recovering from a heart attack, enabling me to use some of the personal observations I made as a heart patient. But imaginings are fluid and ephemeral. As I stated earlier, the outlines I make are not set in concrete. Braddock's story, as it developed, became more about her relationship to the university than about her relationship to her boyfriend.

As a completed novella, "The Consolations of Empire" follows Camille Braddock over the course of a long week. An occasionally ambitious assistant professor coming up for tenure review, dealing with an ill boyfriend with whom she wants to break up, dealing with a troublesome student (the same plagiarist Tom Holt confronted in "Fate"), Braddock becomes suddenly aware that the changing nature of higher education is going to have an impact on her day-to-day professional life. As she begins working on her next project,

examining the impact of the university on the city of Austin, Braddock comes to realize that there are some advantages to being part of an empire.

As the novella opens, she passes through the English Department's mailroom, and notices a significant change: the photographs of the department's old and buried professors, which had been hanging from the mailroom walls since forever, are gone.

The dead professors: nearly a hundred years of them, eighty years of them at least, 8x10 black and white portraits of professors who had been members of our department; most of them male, of course, and fussy-looking, and prissy; some of them dull and tweedy, some with sparkles of intelligence flashing up from the past; some famous; most not. I had been in the department for over five years, and they had been gazing out at me the whole time; until they weren't. The walls of the mailroom were a dull brown pumpkiny sort of color, except for the pale yellow-white rectangles where the photos had been; an ill-looking checkerboard effect.

"What happened to the dead professors?" I asked.

This is an obvious portent of change—bad change—in the department, and it marks a break with the old traditions of scholarship. What lies ahead for the department is the creation of a new and rapidly changing convention that features increased administrative scrutiny and accountability—the audit culture Tuchman writes of.

Braddock is informed by the Assistant Department Head that she has been avoiding several of her new administrative requirements, and he warns her that this may have a negative impact on her tenure, despite a fine publication record. As she makes half-hearted

efforts to deal with her new responsibilities, she gains a little insight into the role of the university, and its relationship with the city of Austin. In one scene, after meeting with the defeated Tom Holt in his underground office, Braddock wanders the campus mall, seeing it as if for the first time. Then she ascends the main building's tower.

...as I looked out toward my home, I realized that I was at the center of the city. Not quite literally, as in the center of a perfect circle—vast, irregular neighborhoods stretched out to the northwest and southeast—but I was at the center of the city morally and psychically: I was at the center pivot of the city's dynamo, the source of everything, all the energy on display, all the layers of memory. It wasn't the state government that was responsible for Austin, the city as it existed, it was the university. Everything I could see was created by the university—by the hundreds of thousands of active, energetic young people who had passed through it, by the hundreds of thousands who stayed in Austin, at least for a little while, building this intricate web of bars and homes and businesses and schools and stores—of life—the web stretching out to the working class households of the north and east and south, an economic web that brought employment at second and third removes to thousands of people. The university, oligarchic and corporate, had brought all this into being, doing its best to transcend or at least ignore the miserable treasonous foundation displayed on the South Mall. Everything in Austin belonged to the university; to knowledge.

The climax of Braddock's week comes at a lecture given by an "academic motivational speaker," Dr. Lonnie Sezler. Sezler, of course, speaks a lot of nonsense, though it is nonsense which may in fact be what the future holds for the humanities.

"Everybody hates literature," Dr. Lonnie said. "And, if we're honest, we'll admit that we hate literature, too."

Dru just stared at him. I just stared at him.

"All you rhetoric people, all you creative writing people, all you engineers and biologists, and physicists and historians and philosophers—you all hate literature. Everybody—everybody in this room—wishes that literature would go away." Dr. Lonnie smiled at us with his glittering toothy smile. "And it *is* going to go away. And we're going to go away with it!"

In the end, Braddock will probably get her tenure and will be stuck—trapped—in an institution which is quickly eroding from beneath her feet.

For the final novella, I wanted to try to channel the voice of an undergraduate. The writing process for "Incomplete" differed from the two previous works, for I skipped the intense visualization and notecard stages, and went straight to the notebooks. I tried to write the first draft as quickly as possible, with the goal of creating a narrative voice that was young and reckless and a little bit crazy. In this novella, Goethe's old allowance that a novella may contain "strange instances of tomfoolery" is demonstrated; for the narrator, Travis Smithson, is foolish and chaotic and absurd. Travis is also young, of course, and his reasoning powers are not yet fully developed, and what reasoning powers he has are

perhaps clouded a bit by drug and alcohol use. Travis is a former student of Tom Holt's (who describes him as "one of these kids who discover[s] Hunter Thompson or Jack Kerouac and go[es] suddenly crazy"), and a current student of Camille Braddock's, and "Incomplete" is the story of Travis's attempt to write a term paper for Braddock's class. Travis is cutting it close: he has only a couple of days to get it done, and is constantly distracted by social temptations of Austin nightlife. Simultaneously, Travis is trying to come to terms with the aftermath of a murder he witnessed. Though his personal life is fairly chaotic, Travis is actually a good student, intelligent and motivated. But it's not clear—to him or to anyone else—if he can successfully fit into the modern university.

After spending the night in jail on a charge of public intoxication, Travis fortifies himself with some methamphetamine and prepares to head down to campus, where he is scheduled to give a presentation in Braddock's class.

The bathroom floor next to the toilet was all rotted away from years of Barnes missing the bowl, but the tub and shower worked::::::::::::and I stood under the almost sort of warm water thinking about my Tuesday class, Dr. Braddock's Narratives of the American West, to the presentation I had to give::::::::::::*Into the Wild*, I could nail that, knew that story from my heart, had lived it, had been a romantic refugee all my life, a concept hard for civilians and other losers to understand::::::::::::when I dressed—clean clothes, cleaner, at least—and came out, Barnes was in bed watching *All My Children*: it was just starting—

"You're really going to class?" Barnes.

"Sure." Me. "I have to make a presentation."

I had particular fun writing in Travis's voice. In "Fate," Holt describes Travis's writing as "full of never-ending endless continuous sentences marked with dashes and ellipses and Tom Wolfe-inspired running full colons and weird hyperbolic statements." The running colons are indeed taken from Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and are an attempt to depict the occasionally erratic thinking of someone taking speed.

The book Travis is supposed to discuss, *Into the Wild*, by Jon Krakauer, is the story of a young man whose romanticization of wildness and adventure led to his own death. Travis is impatient with people who see the book's protagonist as foolish or selfish.

"Looking out over the edge of a cliff doesn't mean anything if you're tied to a rope." Me. "Calling home ruins everything."

"The wild would be just as wild." Dr. Braddock. "In the end, though, I'm not so interested in his parents. But what about all the people he met on his travels? All the people he touched—the old man, the people he worked with on the farm."

"They'd be just as touched even if he didn't die?" Jared.

"Maybe it took his death for them to realize they'd been touched." Me. "Or maybe they just made up being touched—maybe they're just a bunch of liars."

Travis's story is connected to the stories of Holt and Braddock through the institution of the university. As a student, Travis is less aware of the changing university than the other characters. However, he does occasionally pick up on the state of the university, a

little bit. In one scene, Travis has drinks with his roommate, Barnes, a failed graduate student, and Broughton, a cynical history professor.

“Oh, don’t start crying about old Austin.” Me. Really, it was boring listening to old people whine about the Old Days.

“No, it was different.” Barnes. “Broughton knows this. Like, the university used to let people come in and run on the track—now they moved the track out of the stadium to a new place, and they put a fucking fence around it.”

“I bet you ran on the track a lot.” Me.

“Chasing hookers, maybe.” Broughton. “But, yeah, you’re right—the university’s separated itself from the community, built a fence. That’s the corporation talking. Shit, they even kicked the state historical association off campus.”

“Who cares about Texas history?” Barnes.

“Not the university.” Broughton.

“But.” Me. It was like I was caught in a crossfire: Barnes hated the university because he hadn’t made a life there, and Broughton hated the university because he had. “But what difference does it make for a student? So what if some bum can’t come in and run laps on the track?”

“The corporation’s going to give you larger sections, more online classes, less-qualified teachers.” Broughton. “You might notice, maybe not. Most kids are only here for four years, not long enough to see a difference.”

“Students are stupid.” Barnes.

“Hey!” Me. Though I suppose he was right about everyone else besides me.

Though Travis isn’t stupid, he ends up at a dead end with his term paper—very stuck. Even his use of methamphetamine can’t help him crank it out. Desperate—a little desperate—Travis seeks out Holt, his former comp teacher, looking for help and advice. In addition to being a logical plot step in this particular narrative, this scene helps tie the three novellas together, creating a sort of composite narrative strength. Holt, as overworked as ever, is reluctant to help Travis.

“I’ve got—” Holt sagged again. “I’ve got, like, 180 students.”

I thought: one more won’t hurt. Then I remembered what Broughton had been saying, how the corporatists were ruining my education. And now here was the proof: poor Dr. Holt and his unfortunate 180 students.

“That’s too many.” Me.

“Yeah—”

“I know this history professor, Pete Broughton? He was telling me that the humanities are getting totally screwed over—classes are too big, you don’t get paid enough—”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“So.” Me. I was trying to think fast. Some crank would have helped. “So, I don’t know—here’s your chance to fight back. Subvert the corporation. Do your job—educate.”

He laughed at that. “Oh, come on.”

“No—I’m serious.” I was pretty sure I was serious. “You can change the fucking world.”

I’m pretty sure Travis is serious in this scene. He really believes that education can change the world. And it’s something that I think, too: that despite the documented institutional decadence of the university, despite audit cultures and corporate-style decision-making, education can still occur; and can still make a difference. The protagonists of all three novellas—Tom Holt, Camille Braddock, and Travis Smithson—all have the individual capacities to insure that educations are achieved, to fight rear-guard battles to maintain standards, to make sure that learning occurs. Whether they do, or not, as the stories continue outside the compositional frames of the narrative, is of course unknown.

CHAPTER II

FATE

At the end of the semester, the week after a cheerless and lonely Thanksgiving, on a dreary, rainy day, I was trudging along with mobs of students through Parlin Hall, the English building, when someone called my name. I looked around. Damp, dripping students were coming and going in the hallway, many chattering chatting chatting on cell phones, some hooked up to iPods, jostling along with backpacks and books. Then I saw Dr. Camille Braddock, a professor who had been on my committee.

“Tom!” she said. “What luck—I was just thinking about you.”

I felt a sudden wave of guilt and anxiety. She had no reason to be thinking about me. I asked, “What?”

Dr. Braddock stepped between a pair of giggling girls and came over. She was dry—had probably been teaching in one of the classrooms upstairs—and trim and cheerful, carrying an armload of multicolored folders. Student work, probably: even professors had to grade, sometimes, a little.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Braddock said. “I was thinking about you—wondering if you might be able to do me a favor.”

A favor. I looked away, down the hall to the retreating girls—still giggling, and it briefly occurred to me to wonder just what the hell they were so happy about—and I then looked back at Dr. Braddock. It was one of those day-to-day moments that everyone has at times, I think, and seem to happen to me fairly regularly, moments that open up into an eternity, an endless unfillable void where a person can instantly pause to consider just how

screwed-up a life can become. *A favor.* I was already doing too much, and following through on too little. I was a post-doc, a lecturer, an adjunct—a serf. I was teaching two sections of Intro to Literature and a section of Composition and Rhetoric at the university, and three sections of comp at the community college. I was tending bar three nights a week to get enough extra money to at least make payments on my loans. I was scrambling around trying to find a tenure-track job. And Dr. Braddock, who should have known or at least sensed my status and situation, wanted to ask me for a favor.

“A favor?” I asked. I was starting to come up out of the void, and I was pissed, and depressed. A fucking favor.

“You have a minute?” Dr. Braddock asked. “Or do you have to go teach?”

I checked my watch. I had twenty minutes until the next class. “No, I’m free right now.”

“Excellent—come on to my office.”

I turned and followed Dr. Braddock up the hallway I had just come down. The floor was a little muddy and slippery from all the water the wet students had tracked in, but Dr. Braddock calmly stepped along in an expensive pair of black boots. Faculty offices opened on either side of the hall: the office doors had large, frosted glass windows in them, and many professors had photos and newspaper clippings taped to their doors—cartoons, funny sayings, poems. Dr. Braddock’s door, though, was bare: creamy whitish gray paint, the frosted gray window, a cardboard tag with her name and office hours. Over the years I’d been past this door dozens of times, maybe hundreds, but had never gone through it, not even when I was one of her students.

“Come on in,” Dr. Braddock said. She unlocked the door and opened it. “Have a seat.”

Dr. Braddock’s desk faced the door, and beyond it was a window—a window! My office, if you could even call it that, was stuck in the dark basement of the undergraduate library, a dank cubicle I shared with a pair of adjuncts from the Spanish department and a leaky sewage pipe. Dr. Braddock’s office was big and dry and had a window. Life on the tenure track! I almost felt like crying.

“Sit down, please.” Dr. Braddock dumped her big armload of student work to the desktop. A red folder slipped off onto my side of the desk, and I picked it up and put it back. I sat down.

“Just a second,” Dr. Braddock said. “There’s something I need to look at.”

I sat back while Dr. Braddock checked her email. There were bookshelves on either side of the desk, and behind the chair I was sitting in. I recognized a few titles: Goetzmann’s *West of the Imagination*, Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*. *Desert Solitaire*, *Great Plains*, *Regionalism and the Humanities*. Dr. Braddock worked in literary and photographic narratives of the American West.

“So—how are you?” Dr. Braddock turned away from her computer and looked at me. “You’re lecturing, right? On the job market?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I interviewed at Northeast Oklahoma a couple of weeks ago.”

“Northeast *Oklahoma*,” she said, slowly. There was a little trace of—what? Mockery? Pity?—in her voice, like she was really saying *Bumfuck State* or something. What the hell—Northeast Oklahoma was a real job, with health insurance. She asked, “How’d *that* go?”

“Haven’t heard anything yet,” I said.

“It’s rough out there,” Dr. Braddock said. “The job market’s tight.”

I shrugged. “That’s what everybody says.”

“I know you’ll find something good,” Dr. Braddock said. “But listen—I wanted to ask you for a favor.”

“Yeah?”

Dr. Braddock leaned forward like she was about to share a secret. Her chair squeaked.

“I’m going out to California over break,” she said. “I’m going to do some work at the Bancroft Library and I was wondering—thinking—*hoping*—that maybe you could come by and feed the cats while I’m gone.”

“The cats?” I asked. I slumped down a little in the chair. I thought, At least cats are less trouble than dogs.

“Yeah, my cats, they need somebody to come by a couple of times a day and feed them. It shouldn’t be too much trouble—they’re older cats.”

The void opened up again. Despair seeped out. I do too much, I don’t follow through enough. It was the end of the semester: in a few days I would have 150 or so papers to grade and a job search to organize. A life to lead. Despair seeped out of the void, enveloped me. I was going to say *Yes*, of course I was—I couldn’t say *No*, ever. My parents raised me to be nice, to be agreeable, to be helpful, and I am. It’s a quality that has never served me well. When friends need help moving, I move. When students think their grade is too low, I raise the grade. Dentists and doctors schedule my appointments at weirdly inconvenient times. Butchers sell me bad meat. I paid too much for my car, and pay mechanics too much for not fixing it. I can’t say *No*. If I was a girl, I’d be pregnant

all the goddamn time, with a half-dozen or so brats from previous favors—previous *Yeses*—squalling around unfed in dirty diapers. It’s just the way I am. When I look in the mirror I see a very weak man.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. The void closed. The despair, I knew, would linger. “I mean—sure. I don’t have any plans or anything. I like cats.”

“Excellent!” Dr. Braddock said. “I knew you were the man for the job!”

From: Emily Caldwell

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: Money

So when are you going to get me that money for the electric bill? This is taking way too long!

Em

At 2:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays, I taught a class over in Garrison Hall, a section of RHE 306, Rhetoric & Writing, and it was the class I always dreaded—not so much for the class itself, 25 or so sullen young people who didn’t want to be there, but for the room I taught in. Garrison 128 was right next door to Garrison 132, and in Garrison 132 at 2:00 MWF was a class taught by my ex-girlfriend, Emily Caldwell.

I did my best to avoid Emily, but even so I managed to run into her at least once a week before or after class. Seeing her was always the low point of my week. Emily was always quick with a snarky remark about someone or something—bad professional behavior, I thought—and even quicker to bug me about money she claimed I owed her on our last electric bill.

In order to avoid Emily I usually got to Garrison 128 a few minutes late—Emily of course was always very punctual and always started her classes on time. I was happy to dodge her and begin class a few minutes late, much to the annoyance of a few students who saw themselves as consumers of education and expected everything to run as smoothly as a goddamned Jiffy-Lube. I was unmoved by the consumers, though, and usually ended class a few minutes early, too, rushing the students out into the hall and off to wherever they had to go, then fleeing myself. I put more work into dodging Emily than I did teaching the class.

But after seeing Dr. Braddock I was running a bit later than normal, even, and to cover the material I ended up running the class longer than usual, too, aware of the few students who were angry at me for my weird starting and stopping times, and the many students who were pissed because I hadn't finished grading the essays they'd turned in almost three weeks earlier. Still, class came to an end, and the students dropped off their homework assignments and hustled off into the hall. I could see through the open door that Emily's class was letting out, too. I scrambled around, trying to pile up everything—homework, handouts, whatever—so I could escape. When I looked up again, I saw a student coming back into the room—Nelda Krueger, a pretty girl who had been making me nervous all semester.

“Dr. *Holt*,” Nelda said.

I looked past Nelda and saw Emily standing in the doorway.

“What can I do for you?” I asked. I looked away from Nelda, down at the jumbled stack of paper on my desk.

“I was wondering what the deal was on the final portfolio,” Nelda said. She had fine brownish blondish hair and sharp brown eyes and pearly teeth and she smiled with her mouth open. “You said it was supposed to be our best paper, revised, but I haven’t got my last paper *back* yet, and it’s my best one, I think. So how can I revise it if I don’t know what you think of it?”

“There’s plenty of time,” I said. Emily was still standing in the doorway, clutching books to her chest and pouting. I looked back at Nelda. “I’ll get the papers back Wednesday—or maybe Friday—and you’ll have plenty of time for revision.”

Nelda put her hand on the table and looked distressed. “But I have all these *other* assignments coming due! I’d like to get this one out of the way.”

“You’re going to have plenty of time,” I said again. “Really—you’re doing fine in this class. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Okay.” Nelda didn’t sound convinced.

“Come by my office and talk to me,” I said. “We’ll get it worked out for you. You’re going to do fine.”

“Okay,” Nelda said again.

“Send me an email if you have any questions,” I said.

“Thanks, Dr. Holt,” Nelda said. She turned to leave and I watched her walk away, then looked up at Emily standing there, dumpy and frumpy and frowning. She came slowly over to my table.

“So,” Emily said, “I guess that’s the undergrad you’re fucking this semester, huh?”

“What?” I looked at her. “No!”

“I saw how you looked at that girl,” Emily said.

“I was not,” I said. “Besides, what am I supposed to look at—the floor?”

Emily smiled a little. “You can look at anyone you want, as long as you look professionally.”

Professionally. Right. I asked, “Yeah? So who are you fucking now?”

“Not a student!”

Somebody, then. I didn’t care.

Emily said, “So when are you going to get me that money for the electric bill?”

The electric bill. That. I sagged. “I don’t have it,” I said. “You’ll have to wait.”

“I’ve been waiting,” Emily said. “It’s not much.”

I pulled out my billfold and gave her twenty dollars. I said, “That’s all I have right now.”

Emily stuck the bill in her pocket. “You still owe me eighty-four dollars.”

“Whatever,” I said.

Students from the next class were filtering into the classroom. I finally jammed the homework into my briefcase. I said, “I’ve got to get out of here.”

I grabbed my briefcase and we left the room and went up the stairs and out onto the mall. The rain had stopped but the sky was still overcast and low. I started back toward my dungeon in the basement of the UGL.

“Walk me over to Parlin,” Emily said. “I need to check my mail.”

“I was just over there,” I said.

“Well, you can go again.”

I gave up. We passed the statues of Jefferson Davis and Woodrow Wilson and down the steps to Parlin. Emily, still in grad school, had a mailbox there. Me, a post-doc, a nobody, an unperson with no rights, of course had nothing, anywhere.

“You shouldn’t stare at your students like that,” Emily said.

I shrugged and didn’t say anything. Emily was always jealous. I remembered mornings Emily would sit puffy-faced and grouchy, watching the cable news. The blond women reading the news always seemed to annoy her. “You’d probably fuck her, wouldn’t you?” she asked one morning, pointing at the television with the remote.

I said, “I don’t know.”

“Of course you would. The valorization of blondness in this society is a disease.”

I said, “Everybody on TV is beautiful.”

“Her mouth looks like a vagina,” Emily said.

Every morning was like that—one grouchy whine after another. Emily was very smart—sharper than me, at least—but her never-ending petulance made her a pain to be around. Really, I was happy when she kicked me out.

Just outside Parlin we passed a curly-headed little man all dressed in black.

“Hi, Dr. Wytowski,” Emily said.

He walked on past us without looking up. Emily leaned over to me.

“Wytowski’s wife left him. He’s fucking an undergraduate.”

“How do you know?”

“Everybody knows! The girl went on grademyprofessor.com and gave him straight fives and a chili pepper ‘cause he’s so hot.”

I looked at Wytowski walking away from us. I said, “He’s not so hot.”

“Well, you’re not fucking him.” Emily opened the mailroom door for me. “That girl thinks he’s hot. And then his wife went online and gave him a single star—you can’t get any lower than a single star—and she said he was a lousy lay.”

The mailroom was decorated with photos of long-dead and forgotten professors. They made me sad, the photos of the forgotten. Sad, and suddenly afraid that I might never even get into a position to be forgotten, unless I got busy and found a decent job. Emily peered into her mailbox—nothing, of course, just a flyer for some lecture series nobody was interested in, and a memo reminding instructors to get their grades turned in on time. Emily dumped the papers into a recycling bin.

“Listen,” Emily said. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

Another favor—of course. The void opened up again. But I tried to stop it.

“I already paid you what I have—”

“What you *owe* me is an obligation—”

“I don’t have anything else—”

“This is a favor—”

“And I’m not sure I owe you anything!”

“A favor, okay? This won’t cost you anything.”

Sure. I looked at the photos of the dead professors and didn't say anything. A heavy-set, professorial-looking woman ducked into the mailroom and peered into her mailbox. She dumped some unread paper into the recycling bin and ducked back out.

"A favor," Emily said. "I was just thinking you could read a chapter of my dissertation."

Her dissertation. Oh, that. It had something to do with gender roles in the anti-slavery movement, or maybe early feminists—rhetorical positions, something something whatever whoever. We'd talked a lot about her dissertation—well, she talked a lot, and I pretended to listen—but I was never really clear what she was working on.

"I don't have any time," I said. "I'm teaching six fucking classes. I have papers to grade."

"There's no real rush," Emily said. "A week or so, maybe."

"I'm too busy—"

"There's no one else I can hand this to," Emily said. "You're the Emerson expert."

"I am not!" My own work was on 19th century nature writing, mostly on John Muir, and though of course Muir and those guys were all heavily influenced by Thoreau and Emerson, I was certainly no expert.

"You took that Transcendentalism Seminar."

"So did you!"

"Yeah, but you paid attention."

The void opened wider—really, really opened. I could feel my whole future falling into it, joining my past, which was of course already lost in shadowy hellish nothingness.

"C'mon," Emily said. "I'll buy you dinner."

Right, I thought. Buy me dinner with the money I pay you for the electric bill I don't owe anything on. But I didn't say anything. I remembered Emily's prickliness, her defensiveness, her aversion to criticism. In the Transcendentalism Seminar she'd written a paper on gender roles and transgression in *The Blithedale Romance*, and I'd made a couple of suggestions—just moving a couple of paragraphs around—and she didn't speak to me for a week.

“C'mon,” Emily said. “It won't be so bad.”

From: Cynthia Gaines, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Rhetoric and Writing

To: All Instructors

Subject: Grades

Instructors, this is just a reminder that you need to get your grade sheets in to the office no later than 5:00pm, December 18. Late grade sheets must be hand-delivered to the Registrar's Office.

Also, in this Holiday Season, I want to assure all of you that you are appreciated by the University, and the University Community.

Dr. Gaines

Grading was an ordeal for me. Six sections of 25 students, more or less, each student spitting out four papers over the course of a semester—600 papers of an overall dismally low quality, 3000 pages or so of the same errors, same lame punctuation, same irrational arguments. My hand got tired writing in the margins

SF

WC

UC

Sentence fragment, word choice, unclear. Over and over. What I wanted to write was

WTF

or

BS!

or

ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ!!!!!!

What the fuck or bullshit or boring. But I didn't.

Everybody I know hates grading. Even the instructors and professors who claim to love their students—and who actually may love teaching, after all—even they hate grading. And not just the drudgery of it: to have to judge and assess people, and then look them in the eye every day—that's tough. And of course beneath that is lurking the fear of getting a bad evaluation from an unhappy student, a bad evaluation that can doom your job prospects or even your promotion prospects.

The overseers of freshman composition tried to help us—they claimed to, anyway. There were grade-norming workshops throughout the semester, though few people attended them (I never did), and they supplied us with a subscription to an online service

called ChekStudentPapers.com. CSP was many things—a full classroom management package—but the main thing it offered was a plagiarism detector. Students would upload their papers and the service would compare the student work with their database of a gazillion or so other student papers, as well as published articles. Many instructors thought there was something unethical about CSP: it was as if we were assuming that students were going to cheat, and by making that assumption we were violating a level of student-teacher trust. Maybe so. But the university required that we use it; so I used it.

And so I was checking my last batch of papers for my stupid 2:00 MWF class—papers I'd had for over two weeks before getting around to even looking at them—when there was a dull little *beep* on my computer: one of the papers was coming up as 77% unoriginal material. 77%! The highest I'd ever seen. I clicked on the paper.

It belonged to Nelda Krueger, the cute little girl Emily had given me shit about. Cute little thief, I thought. Her paper argued that an obsession with high school football made Texas a unique place: “High School Football is part of the rich beautiful Tapestry that is Life in Texas.”

I do an exercise in class where I have the students read their thesis paragraphs aloud, so the whole class can critique them, and I remembered Nelda reading that line in class. It made my heart sink so low I couldn't even tell her how to fix the damn thing. But now as I read on, past the first paragraph, the tone of the essay changed, and began to read like a movie review. Oh—and that's what it was, according to CSP, the entire body of the essay was taken from a review of the film *Friday Night Lights* that had been published in *Texas Monthly*. When the review referred to characters in the movie, Nelda changed the names

to “some players” or “some coaches.” That was it: a half-retarded thesis paragraph and three pages of a copied movie review, with no attribution, no works cited, no nothing.

And it would be her, too, Nelda, one of the few students I could recognize in class. I could recognize her, all right. From the first day I’d noticed her. I’d been pacing around the front of the classroom, going over the syllabus or something equally stupid when I looked down and noticed a student’s feet propped up on my desk. A girl student’s feet—small, compact, encased in a pair of gray Nikes. A girl student slouched down in her seat with her feet up in my space. Right there, in class, on the first day, the void began to open up, and this time the void was linked to the lower parts of my brain. I looked up past her sneakers and feet, looked up her sturdy brown legs, up, up, all the way up to her crotch, where the girl’s vulva was outlined in the tight yellow fabric of her shorts. Right there in class—on the first day—I stopped everything I was doing and stared at her pussy. The void opened up. I forgot what I was saying. I guess the other students picked up on my confusion, because after a while I sensed some restlessness in the classroom.

I said, “Uh, you always sit with your feet up on the teacher’s table?”

“I’m sorry.” The girl straightened up and pulled her feet to the floor. Her crotch disappeared. “I just like to be comfortable.”

“Well.” I sighed. “Well, don’t let me make you uncomfortable.”

The next class she was slouched down again with her feet up. She was wearing different shorts, denim cutoffs, but I knew what was up there. All semester long she slouched, all semester long she made me uncomfortable. And now, at the end of the semester, she was making me uncomfortable with a stupid fucking stolen paper.

From: Camille Braddock

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: Ben and Fred

Hi, Tom—I was just thinking that you could perhaps stop by my house tonight or tomorrow to meet Ben and Fred and let me show you around. My address is Six Arbor Ridge—it's off Westlake Drive (make sure you stay on Westlake and don't take the fork over the hill!) Give me a call and let me know when you're coming—

All Best,

Camille

Dr. Braddock's house was tucked away in a new development in the hills west of town, and I had some trouble finding it—yes, I took the left-hand fork instead of the right one, and I went up over a dark, wet hill. I made a right somewhere and drove past the gates of enormous mansions. Some of the big houses were lit up for coming Christmas, lights peeping through thick trees. I got turned back around, went down the backside of the hill and ended up on Westlake, where I should have been in the first place, all twisty and turny in the dark. I didn't have GPS, and so I'd printed a map off the internet, and I had to stop a couple of times to look at it before I found the development, The Arbors at LakeRidge, a cluster of new homes set down along the top of a cliff. I found Arbor Ridge,

a cul-de-sac, and Number Six—the numbers were spelled out on all the houses—at the very end. I parked the car and got out.

The houses fronted the street with walls and gates, and there didn't seem to be any life—any movement—around, except for water dripping from the oaks and cedars. I could smell woodsmoke in the air, and Dr. Braddock's steel gate felt cold when I pushed it open. A graveled path led up to her door.

A lit window faced me—a kitchen window, I thought, with warm light inside and frilly curtains, and movement of some sort. I almost turned and ran away. Almost said fuck it—fuck Dr. Braddock, fuck the cats, fuck the favor. But I didn't run away. I wanted to, but I didn't. I pushed on the glowing plastic doorbell, and the door opened immediately.

“Tom!” she said. “I’ve been looking for you. Come in!”

Dr. Braddock looked good: tight black sweater, black jeans, black and red ropers. She stepped aside, holding the door open, and as I stepped past her I caught the scent of her perfume, rich and bright.

“Did you have any trouble finding me?” Dr. Braddock asked. She was standing in the doorway, looking out through her gate to the street.

“Not really.”

“It’s so dark out here you can barely see the street signs! About half the time people come to see me, they drive right past the turnoff and end up on 360 or back in town.”

“Or they take the wrong fork and go over the hill,” I said. “It’s an adventure—it’s like being Lewis and Clark or something.”

“Without a Sacajawea to show you the way,” Dr. Braddock said. “How sad.” She shut the door. “Well, this is the house.”

“Beautiful home,” I said. I looked around. There was a kitchen—the kitchen with the warm light—to my left, and a living room to my right. Once again I thought, Life on the fucking tenure track.

“Thanks—I’m so happy here.” Dr. Braddock stepped past me again. “Let’s introduce you to the boys. Fred! Ben!”

I followed her into the living room—nice, tasteful, fireplace with a popping little fire, bookshelves full of books, prints of 19th century photographs on the walls. Over the fireplace was a large Russell Chatham lithograph, a winter scene in the west somewhere, brown cattle standing in a snowy field with a horizontal gray band of river running across the print. A very quiet work.

“Here’s Fred!” Dr. Braddock bent over and came up with an armful of yellow cat. “This is Fred. Fred, this is Tom.”

Dr. Braddock came over and held Fred out, and I felt obligated to take the cat from her.

“I wonder where Ben is?” she asked.

I had no idea. Fred the cat lay stiffly still in my arms for a moment—he felt tense and cranky. Then he kicked me in the belly and twisted around and dropped to the floor. Fred walked over to the fireplace, then turned and sat and stared at me. I thought, Fuck you, Fred.

“Here’s Ben!” Dr. Braddock motioned me over. “I don’t want to disturb him.”

I crossed the room and stood next to Dr. Braddock. There was an old gray striped cat dozing on the floor. He opened his eyes and looked sleepily up at us.

“Ben, this is Tom. He’s going to be feeding you while I’m gone.”

“Hey, Ben,” I said. Ben closed his eyes again. I guess I’m not very impressive.

“He’s old,” Dr. Braddock said. “He sleeps a lot.”

“Lucky Ben.”

“Now, remember,” Dr. Braddock said, “they’re inside cats—they never go outside.”

“Never?” I asked.

“Never,” she said. “It’s dangerous out there—they could get hit by cars, or attacked by coyotes. People lose cats and small dogs all the time.”

“Damn.”

Dr. Braddock led me back through the kitchen, gleaming and spotless, to what she called “the feeding nook,” a little corner of the kitchen back near the walk-in pantry. There were four dishes on the floor, a water dish and food dish for each cat.

“The red ones are for Ben, and the black ones are for Fred,” Dr. Braddock said.

“It makes a difference?”

“To them it does! They have very different feeding requirements—Ben’s much older than Fred.” Dr. Braddock nudged one of Ben’s red bowls with the red toe of her boot.

“Also, I think Fred prefers black—he’s got a little Goth thing going on or something.”

I looked back to the front of the house and saw both cats watching me. I said, “Good for Fred.”

“The litter boxes are down here.”

I followed Dr. Braddock down a short flight of stairs. The house—all the houses on the street, I guess—was hacked into the limestone edge of a ridge, and had a sort of semi-basement, unusual in Texas. At the foot of the stairs was a little room with the cat boxes—two pale green boxes. I guess Fred’s Gothic impulses didn’t extend to where he crapped. Sliding glass doors led outside, and there were metal utility shelves crammed with textbooks along the walls. Through a doorway I could see another room with a washer and dryer. Everything smelled like lemon air freshener.

“Well, these are the boxes—you’ll have to clean them frequently.”

“Look at all the textbooks,” I said.

“Oh, those.” Dr. Braddock shrugged. “Publishers keep sending me exam copies of rhetoric texts—handbooks, readers, I don’t know. Nothing I can use, though, and I don’t want them cluttering up my office, so I end up lugging them home.”

“You could sell them,” I said. A couple of times a semester an odd-looking little man would wander through the adjunct dungeon buying up spare textbooks. And we always had them, too, even the Spanish instructors. As Dr. Braddock said, publishers were always sending out exam copies of their books. Selling them was a good way to make a few extra bucks.

“Too much trouble.” Dr. Braddock picked up a box of trash bags. “These are for when you clean the litter box. Fresh litter is in the bin by the wall.”

Dr. Braddock headed back up the stairs. I was right behind her, my face inches from her butt, tight in jeans. In class sometimes I would space out into fantasy, a more pleasant version of the void, wondering what she looked like naked, having my little fantasy while

slides of Albert Bierstadt and Alfred Jacob Miller flashed on the walls around us. She was a good-looking woman.

“I’ll send you an email with the details of the feeding and cleaning,” Dr. Braddock said over her shoulder. “It’s pretty basic.”

“I think I can handle it,” I said. I was staring at her ass.

Ben joined us at the top of the stairs and followed us to the door. He was rubbing against Dr. Braddock’s legs. Seemed like a nice cat.

“Well.” Dr. Braddock looked at me. “Do you have any questions—about anything?”

I looked down at Ben. “No, I guess not.”

Dr. Braddock laughed. “You *never* ask questions! I’ve noticed that about you.”

I blushed. “I guess it’s my learning style.”

“Well, it works for you.” Dr. Braddock opened the door and put her hand on my arm.

“Thank you *so* much!”

From: Thomas Holt, PhD

To: Nelda Krueger

Subject: Paper #4

Hi Nelda,

I’ve been grading your paper and I have some questions about it. Could you come see me before class Monday?

Dr. Holt

From: Nelda Krueger

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: re: Paper #4

Oh yea I was having problems with the paper check thing and I might have sent you the wrong paper. Do you want me to send you the right one?

Nelda :)

My boss, such as I had one, was Dr. Cynthia Gaines, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Rhetoric and Writing. I knew that the plagiarism report would flag to her office, so I sidestepped the void and showed a little initiative: I made an appointment to see her, before one of her minions got around to contacting me. And, really, I hoped I could throw the problem over to her office before I had to do anything about it.

I'd seen Dr. Gaines before—had heard her speak at the big meetings we'd have before the start of each semester—but I didn't know her at all. She was a tall, elegant black woman and seemed very tough.

“So, you've got a problem with a student,” she said when I came into her office.

“Well, yeah,” I said. I told her about the CSP plagiarism flag—the 77%—about the ease with which I was able to Google up the movie review Nelda had plagiarized. I handed Dr. Gaines some printouts: Nelda’s essay with the stolen sections highlighted (nearly all of it), and a copy of the movie review, also with the stolen sections highlighted.

“It looks pretty bad,” I said. “But—”

“It looks pretty bad,” Dr. Gaines said. “Have you talked to the student yet?”

“I sent her an email immediately after I found—this.” I didn’t know what to call it—the plagiarism, the theft, the shit. “That was Friday night. I told her I needed to talk to her before or after class Monday. But she didn’t show up to class. And then last night I got this.”

I handed Dr. Gaines a copy of the email where Nelda said it was a mistake, that she’d uploaded the wrong paper.

Dr. Gaines read the email and then looked up at me. “And you believe her?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “About an hour ago she emailed me a new paper—everything’s different, she doesn’t even use the same source material, and everything’s cited.”

Dr. Gaines looked over the printouts, and sighed. After a moment, she asked, “So, when was this paper due?”

“The nineteenth,” I said. I felt stupid. Also afraid that she might ask me why it was taking me three weeks or so to grade the damn papers.

“*November* nineteenth,” Dr. Gaines said. “Today’s December fourth. So this girl’s had two extra weeks to get her paper together. And four days since she got caught.”

I said, “Well....”

“And she says it was a mistake.”

“Yeah.”

Dr. Gaines said, “We’ve had seventeen mistakes like that in the past two weeks, people claiming they turned in the wrong paper.”

“Damn!”

“Even if it is a mistake, it’s her responsibility to turn in the correct paper on time.”

“Sure,” I said.

“So what do you want to do about it?”

Over the weekend I’d been mad at Nelda—mad, offended—she’d violated the trust that is supposedly so important in the classroom. But then when I got the revised paper, I kind of believed her, believed that she had actually maybe learned something in my class, that she had merely made a mistake, really, that she really did know how to cite sources, that she knew that lifting texts was wrong. That she was honest. Over the weekend I had wanted to give her an F, fail her in return for the extra work she was making me do, the grading, the printing, the highlighting, the fretting. Hell, I wanted to give her an F-minus, I wanted her expelled from the university! But now—

“Well,” I said. “Even if it was a real mistake, the correct paper was turned in late.”

“Almost three weeks late,” Dr. Gaines said.

“So she’s going to get an F either way.” I felt relieved. I didn’t really have to make a decision.

“You can go so far as to award her an F for the entire course,” Dr. Gaines said. “Or you can require her to take Scholastic Integrity Counseling. Or you can turn her over to

the Academic Review Board—they might even expel her. Basically, though, it's up to you. You can give her whatever you want.”

“I don't know,” I said.

Dr. Gaines looked at me and frowned. I looked away. After a moment she asked, “Aren't you angry about this?”

“Well, yeah.”

“I'd nail her, myself,” Dr. Gaines said.

I sat up a little bit. “Well, then, let's nail her.” Fuck Nelda, I thought. “F on the paper—F-minus on the paper, zero. And maybe we could turn her over to the review board for counseling or whatever?” A weasely question: half of me still wanted to back out from doing anything.

Dr. Gaines said, “That's the easiest way.”

Outside, crossing the plaza in front of the Main Building as I headed back to my office, I spotted Emily—rumpled, blousy—also heading for the UGL. I hadn't read her damn chapter yet, and I knew she'd ask about it. She'd probably bitch about the damn electric bill, too, and I didn't have \$20 on me to pay her off.

I turned and ducked into the side entrance of the Main Building, went down a long hall past the Bursar's Office and an information kiosk, then out the back. There was a little courtyard there with vending machines and tables—and then coming across the courtyard toward me I saw Nelda Krueger. I stopped.

“Dr. Holt!” Nelda was all grinning and cheerful. “Did you get my email?”

“Yeah,” I said. In my hand was the folder with all the information on her plagiarism case.

“I’m *so* embarrassed! After I got your email I wondered what could be wrong, so I went and looked and saw that I sent you the *wrong* paper!”

“Yeah, it’s a total mess,” I said. I stepped back out of the way so that we wouldn’t block the door. Nelda took a step toward me. I could smell her breath mints. Her shirt was open at the neck and I could see a freckle or two, and a little gold heart on a gold chain.

“But it’s okay, isn’t it?”

“Well,” I said. “The CSP said 77% of your essay was plagiarized.”

“Jeeze!”

“So I had to go show it to my boss.”

“But I sent you the right paper today—that first one was a mistake.”

“And I believe you,” I said. I wanted to believe her, at least. Yeah. I took a deep breath, looked at her. Looked her in the eye. “I totally believe you.” I remembered the soft-looking inside of her thigh on that first day of class, those tight yellow shorts—it seemed like yesterday, staring at a pretty girl on a hot summer afternoon. The pretty girl standing here in front of me.

“Listen,” I suddenly said, “we should probably get together at some point and talk about this, you know?”

From: Nelda Krueger

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: just now

Hey I forgot to tell you just now that I can't come to class on Friday I'm going home for the weekend. But if you want to talk to me about the paper or whatever we could maybe get together next week?

Nelli ;)

They hated me, my officemates, Spanish instructors Jennifer and Marco. Jennifer was from Baltimore and Marco from Buenos Aires, and on those unhappy days when we were all in the dungeon at the same time, they would whisper to each other in soft Spanish, whisper and giggle. I had two years of Spanish as an undergraduate, and of course lived in a city that was at least 40% or so Spanish-speaking, and I could barely understand a word they were saying—I could only pick up an occasional word or phrase, like “*pinche carbon*” or “*imbe'cil chingado*.” *Imbe'cil chingado*, and I knew they were talking about me.

Jennifer and Marco were sitting at their desks when I came back from talking with Dr. Gaines—and Nelda.

“Some woman was here to see you,” Marco said. “She left a note.”

“Some woman?” I asked. On my desk was a note from Emily.

Where are you? I thought you had office hours!

Em

“Oh,” I said.

“I told her you were teaching,” Marco said. “You’re not teaching?”

“Office hours,” I said. “*Mis horarios de oficina.*”

Marco and Jennifer burst out laughing.

“What?” I asked. “What wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” Jennifer said. “But you sound like a child.”

“*Un chico tonto,*” Marco said.

“Oh,” I said. I sat down at my desk, which faced away from Marco and Jennifer and was wedged up against a sewer pipe. Our cubicle was right beneath the first floor restrooms in the library, and whenever someone flushed a toilet, water surged and gurgled down the pipe and drowned out whatever anyone was trying to say. I sat there staring at some green ooze that was puddling at the base of the pipe: it was bigger than it had been the day before. The janitor hadn’t been in to mop.

“Office hours,” Jennifer said. “*Horas de oficina.* Say it.”

“I’d better not,” I said.

“C’mon,” Jennifer said. “Try.”

I swiveled around in my chair and gave it my best shot. “*Los horas de oficina.*”

Jennifer and Marco laughed at me again.

“*Horas,*” Jennifer said. “*Horas de oficina.*”

“*Puro burro,*” Marco said to her.

“Just keep working at it,” Jennifer said.

I turned back to my desk. Dr. Gaines had given me some paperwork on Nelda’s— case. Her academic integrity case. Her lack of academic integrity case. I thought of Nelda: fine dark hair, brown eyes, breath mints, the inside of her thigh. A stolen goddamn

movie review from *Texas Monthly*. What an idiot! She really thought she was going to get away with that. Of course, I was an idiot, too—I had to go and tell her that I believed her—yeah, that I totally fucking believed her!

“Hey,” Marco said.

I ignored him.

“Hey!”

They just wanted to make fun of me.

“Dr. Holt?”

I turned around. A student was standing there. Travis something. From the same class as Nelda. Glancing at Jennifer and grinning. Grinning about what?

“You have a student,” Marco said.

I said, “*Sí*.”

“Hey, you got a word right!” Marco said. “Very good!”

“*Sí*,” Jennifer said. She was correcting my pronunciation. “Try it again. *Sí*.”

Someone upstairs flushed a toilet and a surge of water gurgled down the pipe.

“Let’s go out on the patio,” I said to Travis. Even if I had gotten along with Marco and Jennifer, there wasn’t enough room in the cubicle for four people. There wasn’t enough room for three people.

Travis followed me out through the maze of cubes, across a hallway and out into a little patio that was almost hidden between the library and the student union. We sat down at a table.

“So, what’ve you got for me?” I asked.

“I just wanted you to look over my paper.”

Travis was one of these kids who discover Hunter Thompson or Jack Kerouac and go suddenly crazy. I had them every semester, impressionable kids who read crazy books and take the worst possible messages from them, coming up with cornball cockamamie existentialist philosophies and allegedly gonzo ways of looking at the world. Travis's papers were full of never-ending endless continuous sentences marked with dashes and ellipses and Tom Wolfe-inspired running full colons and weird hyperbolic statements—most of which, really, I found kind of stupid. But if his writing was derivative, at least none of it was stolen.

Travis passed me his paper. The prompt for this assignment was to write an argumentative essay taking a stand on a problem facing the city of Austin. Travis was writing about the city's new animal shelter.

Dogs! Cats! Weasels! Mar-fucking-supials! All barking howling jabbering and I can hear them if I open my window though I won't because it is cold out, and also if I opened the window the hounds I share my decrepit bungalow with would run off and commit suicide in front of a bus, or kill someone...or end up in the shelter with the other suicidal and lonesome dogs, cats, etc. But: if I did dare to open my window, I could hear them—the animals...the beasts::::evil creatures that would rip my heart out if they had a chance...drink my blood...homeless creatures for a reason—they hate us::::With good reason!....

I thought of the animals now under my care—Ben, Fred. I hoped they didn't hate me. I bet they didn't. I sat staring at Travis's paper, at the words, not reading them, suddenly happy about getting away from fucking people and going out to feed Ben and Fred.

From: Camille Braddock

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: Care and Feeding Instructions

Hi, Tom—

Here are just a few thoughts on the needs of Fred and Ben:

1. Litter boxes. Using the slotted spoon provided, you will remove solid feces and clots of urine-soaked litter material from the litter box daily. Removed items should be placed into one of the white vinyl bags, then taken to the trash. To reduce the chances of contamination (i.e. ringworm and other parasites), please use the ventilation mask and rubber gloves provided. The ventilation masks are disposable and should be placed in the white vinyl bags with the feces and urine-clots. The slotted spoon and the rubber gloves should be washed with anti-bacterial soap following each use.
2. Cleanliness. Prior to every feeding, you will need to wash out the food bowls

of the cats. The kitties will refuse to eat from a dirty bowl, and you really can't expect them to! Ben, especially, has a sensitive digestive system, and he may become ill if forced to eat from a dirty bowl. Wash the bowls using the anti-bacterial soap I have provided (it's on the counter next to the kitchen sink) and dry them thoroughly using a paper towel. Use each paper towel only once, and dispose of the paper towel by placing it in the trash. (Do not, of course, flush the paper towel down the toilet!)

3. Morning feeding. Each kitty should be fed one bowl of dry food each morning.

- 3.1.1. Fred's (clean) bowl should contain a mixture comprised of $\frac{1}{3}$

Platinum Puss Beef Bonanza, and $\frac{2}{3}$ Platinum Puss Panther Mix. The proportions do not have to be exact, but pretty close to exact. Use a clean spoon, which I have provided, to stir the mixture. Fred can tell when the mixture has not been stirred, and will refuse to eat.

- 3.1.2. Ben's bowl (again, clean) should contain a mixture of $\frac{1}{6}$ Panther Mix, $\frac{1}{6}$ Beef Bonanza, $\frac{1}{6}$ Feline Feast Seafood Blend, $\frac{1}{6}$ Feline Feast Black Angus Nuggets, and $\frac{1}{3}$ Feline Feast Mature Cat Formula. Ben prefers his food layered in order (Panther Mix, Beef Bonanza, Seafood Blend, Black Angus Nuggets, Mature Cat Formula). As stated previously, Ben had a very sensitive digestive system. Though he has most of his problems in the evening, you should observe him closely at all feeding times....

More to come—All Best—

Camille

From: Nelda Krueger

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: Tuesday?

Hey I'm sorry but the only time I can see you is Tuesday afternoon, will that work? Call me if you want.

Nelli ;)

In the mornings I drove out to Dr. Braddock's house—no problems getting lost once I knew where to turn—and fed the cats and then did whatever I had to do that day—grading, mostly—and then I would drive back out in the early evening for the second feeding. Ben and Fred ate all their food and seemed happy—friendly, even, once they got used to me. I ventured down the stairs twice, on the first and second days, to check on the litter boxes: I found turds and clotted clumps of cat piss. The boxes stank a little, but not too much. I

sprayed around some lemon air freshener and left them. I thought, What's the point of cleaning out the boxes every damn day?

On the fifth day, Tuesday, I took Nelda along. She lived west of campus in a condominium her father had bought for her, and she was waiting outside on the steps when I drove up.

"So," she said, "we're going to go feed a cat or something? I thought we were going to talk about my paper." She snapped gum and pushed her light brown hair away from her face.

"Well," I said, "I'm doing a favor for a professor—another professor." I glanced over at her and felt pitiful—and I was pitiful: I felt compelled to remind a 19 year-old girl that I too had a PhD. Though of course I wasn't a real professor, merely a nothing nobody adjunct instructor. "After the cats we can maybe go play some pool or something." Then I said, "Maybe talk about your paper."

The paper. We were supposed to talk about the paper. I didn't want to talk about her stupid stolen paper.

"I like going out in the afternoons," Nelda said. I don't think she really wanted to talk about the paper, either. "Makes me feel like I'm getting away with something."

We went out Lake Austin Boulevard and crossed the river on the low bridge, then west up into the hills. The sky was clear but the sunlight was weak and wintry.

"I've been out here before," Nelda said. "I mean, I think. We came out to a party out here somewhere once. Of course we got lost."

"Getting lost can be fun."

“Oh, I know—especially if you get lost with someone you want to get lost with.”

Nelda smiled at me with her mouth open, small white teeth glistening and hard.

At the house I held the gate open for Nelda and we walked up the gravel path to the door. When I stuck my key in the lock Nelda put her hand on my arm to stop me.

“Aren’t you going to knock first?” she asked.

“No—”

“Maybe somebody came home early—maybe there’s somebody in there asleep.”

“Just some cats in there asleep.” I went ahead and opened the door. As always, Dr. Braddock’s house had that other people’s house smell—not unpleasant at all, but different. A clean smell, but not homey.

I turned on the light in the kitchen. Nelda said, “Nice.”

I went into the living room. Fred was sitting staring out the window, and he turned and looked at us.

“Cute kitty!” Nelda said.

I found Ben sleeping behind a chair. I pointed at him, and Nelda came over and looked.

“Oh, he’s old,” Nelda said. “But he’s cute, too.”

“They’re nice cats,” I said. I pointed at the Chatham lithograph over the fireplace. In the dim light the gray horizontal river looked icy. I said, “That’s Montana.”

Nelda studied the print for a moment. “Looks cold.”

“Books,” I said, pointing at the bookcases. “Photos.” I actually felt very possessive toward everything, as if this nice, tasteful home was becoming mine, in a way, as I presented it to a new viewer. Though I suddenly realized that I could never take a girl like

Nelda—or any woman at all—over to my little apartment off Burnet Road—how shabby all my possessions would look. Shit, how shabby all my possessions *were*.

Ben got up and stretched and came over and rubbed against my legs.

Nelda asked, “What’s upstairs?”

I shrugged. “I guess her bedroom, her office.”

“You guess! You haven’t been up there?”

“Uh, no,” I said. “I’m not much of a snoop.”

“Let’s go look!” Nelda started up the stairs.

“Nelda—”

She didn’t say anything, she just disappeared down the hallway at the top of the stairs. After a moment I followed, Fred and Ben at my heels. I found her in the first room on the right—a large dark bedroom. Black comforter on the bed, flat-screen TV on a rolling cart. Nelda was looking at some framed photographs on the bed’s nightstand.

“Who’s this with her?” Nelda asked. She held up a photo of Dr. Braddock and a woman who was maybe in her twenties. Dr. Braddock looked younger. A mountain range rose up behind the two of them—the Tetons, maybe. “Her daughter? Sister? Niece?”

“Don’t know,” I said.

“Is she married?”

“Don’t know,” I said again. I don’t ask questions, not even when questions are appropriate, like in a class, and I’m not a snoop.

“You don’t know!” Nelda looked at me with her open-mouthed smile, like I was making a big joke. “How come you don’t know?”

“Because I don’t,” I said. I thought back to when I was in her office and she checked her email. There had been rings on her fingers, but no wedding ring that I could remember. I said, “I don’t think she’s married now.”

“Well, obviously she’s not married *now*,” Nelda said. “Where’s her husband’s stuff? Where’s her kids? All she’s got is these cats.”

Fred and Ben were sitting in the doorway watching us.

“You’re sure not very curious.”

“I should go feed the cats,” I said.

Nelda opened a dresser drawer and started going through Dr. Braddock’s underwear.

“Come on,” I said.

“Ha!” Nelda pulled out a black velvet pouch closed with a drawstring. It was a foot or so long, and seemed heavy. Nelda grinned at me. “Open it,” she said. “I’m afraid to look.”

“Put it back.”

“You’re no fun,” she said. She dropped the pouch back into the drawer.

Across the hall, I saw another room: Dr. Braddock’s office. I went in. It was a room almost bigger than my entire apartment, wide and airy and neat, with a desk facing the window, a computer and printer on a side desk, and more shelves with books. Photographs covered the walls, pictures of dust storms and desiccated dead cattle, and on a table by the door was neat stack of manuscript pages. I looked at the title page: *No Water this Year: Memory and Drought in the American Southwest*. Dr. Braddock’s new book, the one she’d just sent off to Oklahoma University Press.

Nelda came in and looked around. “This whole place is really sad, you know? I bet she doesn’t have a friend in the world. She’s just an old lady with cats.”

“She’s not that old,” I said. I didn’t point out that Dr. Braddock was better off than I was, at least— that with two books and a nice house, and an almost tenured-status, she was probably better off than I would ever be. She didn’t need friends.

I turned and went back down to the kitchen. The cats raced ahead of me—hungry, I guess, since it was now early afternoon and their usual feeding time was in the mornings. Nelda tagged along and watched me rotate the bowls from the evening feeding to the morning, then measure out the portions of feed for each cat.

“That’s a lot of work,” Nelda said.

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Are they really that fussy?”

“Dr. Braddock says they are.”

“Maybe while she’s gone you can train them to be not so fussy.”

“I’m not that good a teacher,” I said. We watched the cats eat. Ben seemed to enjoy his food. After awhile, I said, “The litter boxes are down here.”

I led the way down to the utility room. Halfway down I could smell the litter boxes.

Nelda asked, “You haven’t been down here much, huh?”

“Damn,” I said. The boxes had gotten gross almost overnight—apparently some strange tipping point of cat shit stench had been reached. I turned to say something and saw Nelda going back up the stairs.

“Where’re you going?”

“I didn’t say I’d help you!” she called from the kitchen.

Ben was sitting at the top of the stairs washing his face. Then he stared at me.

Oh well. This was what I had signed up for. What I agreed to do. I looked around the room. Doorway to the wash room, doorway leading outside. Bookcase with never-opened textbooks. The cat box supplies on an uncluttered workbench: disposable masks, lemon-scented air freshener, slotted spoon, trash bags, big white plastic bin of litter.

Nelda stuck her head around the corner. “Are you okay?”

“I’m trying not to breath.” I fastened one of the masks around my head and picked up the slotted spoon. Both boxes were full to the brim with shit. How could the cats *do* so much? I thought of all the fancy layered meals I had been feeding them. All for a bunch of shit. I scooped up a rough clot of pee and shit from Fred’s box and tried to slide it into a trash bag. But the bag wasn’t fully open and the clot came flopping out onto the floor, where it broke apart.

“Shit!”

Everything stank. I stepped forward to try to scrape up the big pieces, but I stepped onto the edge of Ben’s litter box and the whole damn thing tipped up and over—shit shooting out across the floor and my sneakers.

“God *damn* it!”

“What?” Nelda was safe upstairs. “Are you okay?”

I looked up. Both cats were at the top of the stairs now looking down at me.

“I need a broom,” I said.

“*What?*”

I pulled the mask away from my face. “I’m looking for a fucking broom!”

After a pause, Nelda said, “You don’t have to curse at me.”

“Yeah, fuck you, too,” I said quietly. I don’t think she heard me: she was up there in the hygienic safety of the kitchen. I kicked the overturned box and it slid across the floor spewing cat shit. I said, “Fuck.”

Ben came down the steps. He paused and looked at me, then came the rest of the way.

“This is all your fault,” I said to him. “So why don’t you clean it up?” Ben didn’t answer.

There was a broom and a metal dustpan in the corner. I swept the floor and managed to get the shit into the trash bag without spilling anything more. Fred came down the stairs and sat next to Ben.

Nelda called, “What’s taking so long?”

I pulled the mask away. “You want to come down and help me?”

No answer.

I went ahead and totally emptied both boxes and refilled them. The cat shit and piss filled two plastic trash bags. I lugged them up the stairs, leaving the cats behind me piddling in the clean boxes.

In the kitchen Nelda was drinking a glass of water, leaning against the counter. She shook her hair away from her face and smiled at me.

“That took a long time.”

I didn’t say anything and went on out into the garage. I put the bags of cat shit into a big green trash bin.

Nelda stood in the doorway. “This is really a lot of work she has you doing.”

“Yeah?”

“So, how much is she paying you?”

I didn't say anything for a moment. How stupid I suddenly felt! Nelda stood in the doorway, bright and cheerful, smiling at me.

I shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. It's a favor."

"Wow." Nelda stood there smiling at me with her mouth open.

From: Thomas Holt, PhD

To: Nelda Krueger

Subject: Today

Hi, Nelli—

I had a fun time today. Let's do it again!

Tom

From: Nelda Krueger

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: re: Today

It was great, how about Friday? We could go look at Christmas lights. I

LOVE Christmas lights!!!

Nelli :]

Every day I fed the cats—mixed their damn food perfectly, watered Dr. Braddock’s few plants, picked up her mail, took out the trash and brought the empty trashcan back inside. I even stayed current on the litter boxes: I cleaned them daily, just like she asked me to do. I got used to it, really, driving all the way out there and back twice a day. In the evenings after I fed the cats I hung around an hour and a half, two hours, grading papers and waiting to see if Ben would vomit. A couple of times he did. Once I found the vomit a bit late and Fred was already eating it. I cleaned the vomit up with the provided solvents and paper towels.

I was used to it. Sort of. Only *sort of* because I kept thinking how Dr. Braddock never said anything about compensation. All she ever said was “favor.” And I agreed to do her the favor—of course. I just assumed or hoped she’d take care of me. But maybe she just meant *favor*.

I broke the numbers down. Dr. Braddock’s house was just over nine miles from my apartment. Call it nine. Out and back, twice a day: that’s 36 miles a day. At 50.5 cents a mile...that’s \$18.18 a day for transportation. For 11 days, that’s \$199.98.

Gasoline. My beat-up Chevy Malibu got about 15 miles a gallon on a good day. Total mileage out and back over 11 days: 396. Which is 26.4 gallons of gas at, say, \$2.60 a gallon...\$68.64....

Time! I figured I ought to at least get \$20 an hour for feeding the cats. It took me an hour and a half in the mornings (including drive-time) and two and a half in the evenings. Four hours per day: \$80. Eleven days—\$880.

Mileage	199.98
Gasoline	68.64
Time	880.00
total	1148.62

Holy shit!

I wrote the figures on a file card, then folded it up and put it in my billfold to remind me of my foolishness, my stupidity, my lack of a backbone—my inability to say No. The next day, when I went downstairs to clean the litter boxes, I came back up the stairs with a couple of those unopened, never-read rhetoric texts—*Everything's An Argument* and the sixth edition of *The Bedford Handbook*. Sold them that afternoon for \$35. The way I looked at it, Dr. Braddock still owed me about \$1100.

From: Emily Caldwell

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: my chapter

Hey, have you even read the chapter yet? I need to get revisions off to my

chair before xmas. Let me know.

Em

Also the electric bill—

The grading never stopped. Papers kept coming and coming, a blizzard. I took my work over to Dr. Braddock's in the evening, to try and get some work done while I watched the cats. The cats helped a little: Ben usually slept curled up next to me while Fred would perch in a chair, dozing, opening his eyes occasionally to see if I was still there. After a while—bored silly with bad student papers—I tossed aside the grading and picked up Emily's dissertation chapter.

"Emerson reverts to his familiar topoi in 'The State of the Union,'" Emily began, "topoi that had him slowly, staggeringly, come to accept Lincoln's plan for emancipation as a wartime act."

The first sight of the word *topoi* made me sleepy—as sleepy as Fred or even Ben. I didn't have the heart—or the brainpower—to read any more.

Poor Emily. I remembered that Transcendentalism Seminar—one of the last classes we'd had in grad school. She was, as always, tense and nervous and grumpy, and she rebelled against the reading. All of it. She just didn't want to do it. Emerson, Parker, Thoreau, Douglass, Whitman, all those guys. They turned her off. They made her mad. When it came time for her to give a presentation to the class, she did miserably, all red-faced and stuttering. At home that night she cried, mad at herself for doing so poorly, mad about not preparing enough for her talk, mad about having acted stupid in front of the professor and the other students. Most of all she was angry at the Transcendentalists: they

were boring, they had nothing to say to the 21st century, they did not inspire her. Yet her dissertation topic—rhetorical intersections of feminists and abolitionists—dealt almost entirely with the work of the Transcendentalists. She was stuck with them.

I looked at the chapter again. *Topoi*. I couldn't stand it. What the hell. I'd just lie to Emily, tell her I'd read the damn thing, tell her what a remarkable achievement it was, or whatever. Or something. Even if she knew I was lying to her, what could she say?

I tossed the chapter to the table, but it slid off a pile of ungraded essays and fell to the floor with a soft plop—soft, but the cats woke up and stared at me.

“Don't worry, kitties,” I said. “Go back to sleep.” I rubbed Ben's neck and he began to purr.

Of course, Emily would know I was lying—she always knew. But, really, what could she do about it? She couldn't kick me out of the house again. She might demand the rest of the electric money, but unless I stole a lot more of Dr. Braddock's old rhetoric texts, I wouldn't have anything to pay her. And even if she knew in her heart—her heart, small as it was—that I was lying, how could she actually prove it? Give me a quiz?

Ben rolled over on his back, still purring softly.

“What would Emerson do?” I asked Ben.

Ben opened one eye and looked at me and didn't say anything.

From: Camille Braddock

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: Further Care and Feeding Instructions

Hi, Tom—

Here are some more thoughts on the needs of Fred and Ben:

1. Evening feeding. Each kitty should be fed one bowl of wet food each evening.
 - 1.1.1. Again, Fred enjoys a simpler evening fare than does Ben: ½ can Platinum Puss Wild Keta Salmon, and ½ can Platinum Puss Free-Range Chicken Parmesan. The food should be mixed thoroughly using the provided spoon. (The spoon, of course, should be washed following feeding.)
 - 1.1.2. Ben enjoys a mixture of 1/3 Wild Keta Salmon, 1/3 Feline Feast Mild Beef Barbecue, and 1/3 Platinum Puss Seafood Gumbo. Ben's food should be layered, as a cake: Wild Keta Salmon, Mild Beef Barbecue, Seafood Gumbo. Here's where Ben's digestion becomes crucial: he often vomits, usually within 90 minutes of feeding. Please clean up any vomitus immediately, or else Fred will eat it. Use paper towels and cleaning solvents (clearly marked under the sink) to remove Ben's vomitus. Soiled paper towels should always be placed in the trash.
2. Health. In case of illness or injury on the part of either Ben or Fred, I

have left you two books on feline first aid. While I do not ask that you memorize these texts, I would like you to familiarize yourself with their contents, particularly the section on performing the feline “Heimlich Maneuver.” Knowledge of the feline “Heimlich Maneuver” could be invaluable when coping with Ben’s digestive tract. Of course, in case of serious, sustained vomiting, or any other medical emergency, please call our vets. The numbers are affixed to the refrigerator door.....

All Best,

Camille

Friday evening I took Nelda along for the late feeding. It was a dark, chilly, rainy night. Nelda wanted to go driving around and look at Christmas lights before she headed back to Dallas for the holidays. I didn’t really want to—more gas wasted, I thought, more money spent—but in the end, of course, I said sure. Why not? I couldn’t say No—not to Dr. Braddock, not to a 19 year-old girl. Still, several of the houses on Arbor Ridge were lit up, and they did look nice: one of the houses was all outlined in blue, with its trees wrapped in white, shining like ghosts. They made Nelda happy. Once we got inside Dr. Braddock’s house I felt a little Christmas-y and warm, too, and so I brought out a bottle of Dr. Braddock’s good Haitian rum and poured us each a glass.

“To us,” I said.

Nelda took a sip and winced. “Whew! That’s strong.”

“Barbancourt,” I said. “This is good.”

Nelda looked doubtfully at her glass and went back to the living room. I sat down next to her on the couch.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ll get the cats fed and then we can go drive around and have some fun.”

“It’s fine here,” Nelda said. “It’s safe.”

Safe. What did that mean? Nelda took another sip and winced again. There were some photography books on the coffee table in front of us. One was Mark Klett’s rephotography series on San Francisco, re-shooting scenes of the 1906 earthquake a hundred years later.

I asked, “Have you seen this?” I flipped through the book: shots of disaster and regeneration. Nelda wasn’t impressed. I put the book back on the table.

“So, tell me something,” she said.

“What?”

“I don’t know. Something.”

The big white couch was soft and sort of saggy in the middle, and it pulled us together. I put my hand on her thigh, that thigh I’d been thinking about, and I felt her leg warm through the soft worn denim of her jeans. I moved my hand up her leg. I’d been thinking about that, too.

“What sort of things do you want me to tell you?” I asked.

Nelda shook her head, tilted a little toward me, and I touched her cheek, kissed her, kissed her, and soon we were grappling on the couch, clothes coming off, gasping at times, and Nelda slipped onto me, astride me, and I could see the fading tan lines on her chest and hips.

When I looked up the cats were staring at us. Ben had his ears cocked back.

I said, "The cats were watching us."

Nelda took her head off my shoulder and turned to look at the cats. "That's creepy," she said.

"Dogs get all excited when they watch people fuck."

"I know." Nelda pulled off me and fell back onto the couch. Her panties were still dangling from her right ankle and she pulled them off and held them over her belly. She looked over at me and giggled.

"I guess I should go feed the cats," I said.

"You like those cats."

"Like you better." My boxers were on the floor and I stumbled a bit trying to put them on. Nelda smiled at me. I said, "Come on, cats."

Fred and Ben followed me into the kitchen and watched as I mixed their food. In the living room I heard the TV go on, then off. I sat Fred's black Goth bowl down, then Ben's red bowl. Ben didn't even sniff at Fred's bowl when I put it down—it was like he had faith that I would be giving him his food, mixed just the way he wanted it.

"You really like this rum?" Nelda called.

"Sure," I said. "Want some more?"

Nelda came into the kitchen, soft blue panties on now and her bra, white socks on her feet. I brought out the rum, filled her glass, kissed her on the neck. She looked at the cats eating. Suddenly Ben stepped back and began to hack—*kha! kha!*—and he vomited on the kitchen floor.

"Damn," I said. "That was pretty quick. Usually he waits awhile."

Fred left his black bowl and nosed around Ben's vomit. He began to lick at it. Ben wandered off.

"Gross," Nelda said. She followed Ben back to the living room.

I got out some paper towels and began wiping at the floor. I patted Fred on the shoulder, and he was purring, happy with the vomit. I pushed him aside and cleaned the floor. From the front room I heard the sliding door to the deck open.

I took the wet paper towels out to the garage and put them in the trash bin. When I came back, Fred was still eating, back at his bowl now.

I said, "Where's Ben?"

Fred didn't say anything. He didn't even look up.

"Ben!" I called. "Come finish your din-din!"

I went to the living room. The blinds were open—the door was, too. I went out onto the deck and Nelda was standing there in her bra and panties, leaning over the railing. Dark trees stretched out before us, but everything else was lost in mist and drizzle.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked. I ran my hand down her back and she leaned into me.

"I like it cold."

"You're pretty hot." I put my arm around her. "Where's Ben?"

"He was out here a minute ago. I think he hopped down or something."

"Hopped down?"

"Jumped," Nelda said. "He jumped down there somewhere." She pointed out into the darkness.

"The fuck!" I bent over the railing and looked down. "That's ten feet!"

"He's a cat—cats jump."

“He’s an old cat! Jesus Christ!” I stared at Nelda. “How could you let him jump off the deck?”

Nelda said, “You’re the one who’s supposed to watch the cats.”

“Yeah, but *you’re* the one who left the door open.” I took a deep breath. “You don’t let cats jump off a cliff. Dumbass.”

Nelda just stared at me with her mouth open. Not smiling open, either. Fuck her. I stuck my head back inside and reached around for the deck lights.

“Don’t turn the lights on,” Nelda said.

“We have to see the cat.”

“I’m half-naked!”

“Well, get some fucking clothes on and help me find Ben.”

Nelda ducked inside and started looking around for her clothes. There was a big light in the corner that illuminated the deck: two chairs, an iron table, a dead begonia. Nelda’s rum glass was on the railing. No sign of Ben. Two big lights on the corner of the deck lit up the strip of grass between the house and the trees. No sign of Ben.

I went back inside and began dressing. Nelda had her clothes on and was sitting in one of the chairs.

“Let’s go find Ben,” I said.

“Go find him yourself.”

“Nelda,” I said, “listen—this is a fucking crisis, okay? You have to help me find that cat.”

“It’s your job.” Nelda crossed her arms and stared at the floor. She used to stare at the floor a lot in class, too, when she didn’t want to speak.

“You’re the one who let him out,” I said. “Help me.”

Nelda stared at the floor and didn’t say anything. God damn students who stare at the floor and never say anything.

“Oh, well,” I said. “Fuck you.”

I went down the stairs—it was time to change the damn goddamn litter boxes again—and I opened the sliding glass door and went outside. The narrow strip of grass was wet: the all-day drizzle was turning into a steady rain. Wherever Ben was, he was getting wet. I took a step and looked up. The deck was ten feet off the ground, easy. How the fuck did Ben jump all that way? Why?

Suddenly Nelda’s head appeared at the railing. “What’s the address out here?” she asked. “I’m calling a cab.”

“Oh, don’t call a cab,” I said.

“*Fuck...you.*” Nelda’s voice sounded funny: I don’t know if she was mocking me or insulting me.

“No,” I said, “fuck *you.*”

Nelda said, “Dr. Holt, sometimes you are such a little bitch.” She disappeared from the railing and went back inside.

“Hey—shut the fucking door so Fred doesn’t get out!”

After a moment the door slid shut and the blinds closed. At least Nelda didn’t turn out the deck lights on me.

I looked into the dark trees. “Ben!” I called. “Beeeeeeeeennnnn...” my voice trailing off into the damp air. “Here, Kitty! Here, Ben!”

No answer. Just the soft sound of the rain. I stepped toward the tree line. I hadn't spent much time looking out the windows, but I knew the land dropped steeply away—very steeply in places, not quite a cliff, exactly, but something close to. Down at the bottom, next to the lake, there was a road and some houses. I didn't want to slip and go tumbling down the slope and through someone's roof.

“Ben! Ben-Ben!”

I stepped into the trees. They were mostly cedars, I think—I only study nature writers, I don't study nature, and so I know next to nothing about trees. All I could really tell was that the branches of the trees were very low and tangled, and, of course, wet. I had to stoop to move under them. Just down the hill from the house I found a trail paralleling the tree line. Made by deer, I guess. Hell, I had no idea what was out there—cat-eating coyotes, cat-killing cultists. I didn't even know if Ben was even down here. Maybe he'd gone back around to the other side of the house. I had no idea.

I slipped and slid to my butt. No grass under the trees, no soft leaves, just hard wet limestone and sharp sticks. Then I put my hand on a goddamn cactus as I got up.

“Fuck!” I yelled. “Ben! Where *are* you?”

The cat didn't answer. The rain started coming down harder. I scuttled along the trail, away from Dr. Braddock's house, then passed the house of her neighbor. I ducked, crawled, scooted, all the time thinking what a fucking fool I was. Goddamn cats. Goddamn Nelda. Goddamn Dr. Braddock. Why me? Huh? Tell me that.

Two houses up from Dr. Braddock's, the deck lights were on, and sitting under the deck out of the rain I saw a cat. I froze—I didn't want to scare him away. Above him the

blinds were open and I could see a Christmas tree inside the house. I thought—you fucking people in there, don't you scare my cat.

“Ben?” I whispered. “Hey, kitty! Hey, Ben!”

Then I stepped into—nothing. What? Nothing. Space. I came down hard, very hard, on my right hand, and my leg caught on something. I felt around with my left hand. Something metal—a fucking metal culvert sticking out of the side of the hill to drain the street or whatever. I don't know. Water was dribbling out of it, though. My right hand really fucking hurt. My wrist. I pulled myself up on my elbow, scrambled up the culvert to the strip of grass behind the house. I lay there in the rain for a moment catching my breath. When I looked up, the Christmas tree was still blinking in the window, and the cat was still sitting under the deck, looking at me. And the cat was Ben.

He didn't try to get away when I gathered him up with my good arm, and when we were back inside Dr. Braddock's house I let him drop to the cement floor. I sat back on the stairs and shut my eyes. Ben stepped into his box and squatted to take a piss or something. I just sat on the stairs holding my wrist. Broken, I was pretty sure: it really hurt. I heard Ben scratching around again, and when I opened my eyes he was stepping out of the box. He came over and rubbed up against my leg, purring. Poor old wet cat. Daring cat—led a dangerous life. Took chances. I reached down with my good hand and rubbed his shoulder.

“Yeah, you're a good cat,” I said.

Ben turned, looking up the stairs past me. He trembled, then dashed up the stairs. After a moment I got to my feet and made my own way, slowly, up the stairs.

“Nelda!” I called. “I found Ben!”

No answer. She was gone. A pile of Dr. Braddock's mail was tossed around: apparently Nelda got the address for a cab off an envelope. I found Fred sitting by the window, washing himself. My rum glass was sitting where I left it, and I went over and knocked back what was left. Then I got out my cell phone and called Nelda. She answered on the second ring.

"I found Ben!" I said.

"Good for you," she said dully.

"I am *so* fucking relieved," I said. I didn't want to tell her about my wrist. Not now, at least. "Listen," I said, "what're you doing tomorrow?"

"Nothing with you."

"What—?"

"You are such a fucking loser," Nelda said. "You're not even getting paid to take care of those cats."

"No," I said, "*you're* the fucking loser!" But I think she disconnected on me before I got the words out. Little bitch.

A quick trip to the Emergency Room is may be in order when your wrist appears to be severely warped or distorted or deformed or malformed, or when you experience extreme swelling and bruising, or complete numbness, or excessive discoloration, or seriously curtailed dexterity in the fingers! Always be cautious but also don't worry too much: severe pain in the limb is not necessarily indicative of a broken

wrist.

Personal-home-healthcare.com

Well, it was broken. Severely warped and malformed indeed and my fingers were excessively discolored and my whole hand and arm looked like a giant ugly bruise, and there was no dexterity at all, none—and there severe pain in the limb, too, of course.

Emily came through. Emily rescued me. Drove out in the rain and took me to the emergency room. She got lost four times on the dark twisty turny roads of Westlake, and she called me each time for directions, grumpy and severe but still on her way. The fifth time she called she was out in the cul-de-sac, Arbor Ridge, unsure what house I was in. I hurried outside, hurting, and found her car up the street a little bit and across. I waved at her with my good left hand and crossed over and got in her car.

“Jesus!” Emily said. “You look terrible! What happened?”

“One of the cats got out,” I gasped. “Ben got out. I was trying to catch him and I fell down.”

“You fell down chasing a cat,” Emily said. “Jesus.”

The ER wouldn’t let me in unless I paid them \$100 up front, which I didn’t have. The fee went on Emily’s MasterCard. She frowned. We sat for a long time in the crowded waiting room, Emily reading Len Gougeon’s *Virtue’s Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*, me trying to shut out the sounds of squalling and blubbering children sick with whatever it is children get in the winter. Eventually I was called back for an x-ray and a splint, and a cursory inspection from a doctor.

“You don’t appear to be drunk,” the doctor said.

“No,” I said.

“Most people who fall down on Friday nights are drunk.”

“I was chasing a cat,” I said.

The doctor didn’t say anything. He wrote me a scrip for vicodin, and gave me a xanax for my nerves, and sent me away. Emily was still there when I got out; she showed no sympathy for my pain, but she was still there, and she didn’t grumble too much driving me around until we found an open pharmacy where I could fill my prescription—though she did grumble a bit about having to pay for the scrip.

Back at her apartment—our old apartment—I collapsed back limp onto her familiar, sagging couch, and tilted my head back and shut my eyes. Emily’s cat, Lester, jumped up into my lap.

“You look terrible,” Emily said.

I didn’t want to answer. I didn’t want to think about it. Of course I looked terrible. I deserved to look terrible. I kept my eyes closed and stroked Lester with my good hand. I could feel Emily standing in front of me. I could feel her frowning. She suspected me of—something. Maybe she could sense Nelda molecules floating off my battered body. But so what if she did? So what if she suspected me of anything? She still came out and rescued me.

“Falling down chasing a cat,” Emily said. “That’s the craziest thing I ever heard.”

Well, I thought, you’ve led a sheltered life. But I didn’t say anything.

Emily moved away, toward the kitchen. I heard a cabinet door open, close.

“You shouldn’t have been hanging around out there, anyway. It’s not your home.”

“I had to wait and see if Ben was going to vomit.”

“Oh, bullshit.”

I sat quietly. I didn’t dare tell her about how I’d been studying the feline Heimlich Maneuver. Lester was in my lap, purring. I could hear Emily moving around.

“Here,” she said. “Have a glass of wine.”

I opened my eyes and took the glass from Emily. She sat down heavily next to me on the couch.

“You’re such a big liar,” Emily said. “A bad liar, too.”

“I was reading your chapter,” I said. I sat up a little bit. I didn’t want to disturb Lester.

“Yeah?” Emily squinted at me. She didn’t believe me.

“I thought it was really good.” I took a gulp of wine and two more vicodin. I thought for a moment. Her chapter: I had only skimmed maybe three pages. I tried to remember them. “Really good. You had me from the first topoi.”

“First—”

“I think you’re really on to something,” I said quickly. The xanax was kicking in, and the vicodins were close behind it. I didn’t want to talk about this shit. I just wanted to go to bed. I tried to think. I said, “Morality is essential.”

“*Morality?*”

“Emerson said that. Morality is essential. Go with that.”

“I do,” Emily said. “Sort of, I guess.”

“More,” I said. I took another swallow of wine. “Develop it some more. Put this morality, whatever it is, in a political and social context. Look at the binaries—moral and amoral, war and peace, freedom and slavery. Men and women. North and South.”

I glanced at Emily: she looked like she was about to cry.

“You’re really *on* to something,” I said again. “It’s a good chapter. Your dissertation’s going to knock people on their asses.”

Emily still looked sad. “Yeah,” she said. “Well.”

“Has Dr. Corcoran seen it?” Corcoran was her dissertation chair.

“I’m going to send it to him this week. But he never answers his email—I never know what he thinks.”

“I bet he’ll love it,” I said. I finished the wine and then awkwardly put the glass on an end table. I took Emily’s hand and leaned over and kissed her cheek. Lester the cat rolled off my lap and looked up at me. I said, “It’s a fucking great piece of work.”

Emily looked at me levelly, eyes flat but warm. She said, “What about the Fugitive Slave Act?”

Lester scrambled up and jumped to the floor. I sank back onto my end of the couch, but I still held Emily’s hand.

“My arm hurts,” I said. “I can’t think.”

“But what about Emerson’s reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act? It’s an important part of his political development, isn’t it?”

With my good hand I pulled Emily across the couch to me. She came slowly, heavily, and she rested her head on my chest.

“You stink,” she said.

Of blood and rain and cat, I hoped—not of Nelda.

“I think you prove his rhetorical *and* political development,” I said. I guessed she did. I didn’t know. “The Fugitive Slave Act was a turning point.”

“No shit.” Emily sniffed a little. “You *reek*. We need to get you out of those clothes.”

I didn’t have any clothes at Emily’s apartment, not any more. But Emily moved aside, and I got up and went into her bedroom and stripped out of my shirt and jeans and socks and stood shivering in my damp boxer shorts. There was a yellow and red afghan folded on the foot of the bed, and I draped it over my shoulders, a sort of flowery cape. I was cold and woozy.

Emily came in and looked at me. Woozy, but I took her hand and pulled her close, wrapping the afghan around us.

“Thanks for rescuing me,” I said. I kissed her.

Emily said, “Well, I couldn’t just leave you out there.”

“You saved me.” I sat down on the bed and pulled Emily next to me. We rolled back on the bed and Emily struggled and slipped out of her clothes—jeans down and over her hips and off, her shirt off, her bra off—and then we were beneath a comforter and Emily reached down and grabbed me and squeezed.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” she whispered.

“What?” I didn’t feel much—not too much.

“You’re tired.” Emily pinched my dick again.

“I don’t know,” I said. Emily was warm and soft next to me. I tried to roll away a little but Emily held on to my dick. “I don’t know, maybe it’s the vicodin.”

“Vicodin! I bet it’s one of those little student bitches you’ve been fucking.” Emily gave a yank—I felt *that*.

“Cut it out,” I said.

“You asshole.” Emily’s mouth was inches—millimeters—from my ear. She was warm and soft and I felt like she was all around me. “Wear yourself out on some student slut and then come dragging over here—again.”

“Emily—”

“Get out of here!” Emily yanked on me again.

“Well, let go of my dick,” I said. “Jesus.”

Emily let me loose and rolled away from me. She said, “Just go.”

Hell. I sat up on the edge of the bed.

“Go!”

I got up and went back out to the living room. Just as I flopped down on the couch, Emily came to the door of the bedroom and stood there half-naked.

“You can’t stay here,” she said. “You’re not spending the night on my couch.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Out,” Emily said. She threw a sneaker at me, then another. Then my wet socks . Then my torn, wet jeans and my shirt. “Get out or I’ll call the cops.”

I stood up, wobbly, and put on my jeans.

“And I want the money for the electric bill tomorrow!”

I struggled into my shirt and then sat back down. The socks were too wet to go onto my feet but I managed to put on my sneakers. Emily was watching me, frowning, arms

folded across her chest. I couldn't tie my shoes with only one hand, so I let the laces dangle. I stood up again.

"Emily," I said, "it's the pills."

"And I want money for the pills, too! And the ER!" Emily stomped over to the door and unlocked it and opened it. "And I want that money tomorrow!"

I went out. I said, "Bitch."

Emily slammed the door shut. I stood there a moment, shivering. Then the door opened and my bottle of vicodin came sailing out. The door slammed shut again.

I picked up the pill bottle and shuffled down the stairs to the front of the apartment building. It was still raining, and getting colder. I pulled out my cell phone to call for a cab, but the phone wouldn't come on—the battery was dead or something. Well. Hell. There was a 7-11 a couple of blocks up the street. I could call a cab from there, I thought, and I shuffled up the street in the rain.

From: Camille Braddock

To: Thomas Holt, PhD

Subject: Kitties

Tom! I just got back, and I wanted to quickly thank you for the wonderful job you did caring for Fred and Ben. They seem very healthy and happy (though I think they are rather angry with me!) Please stop by my office, if you get a chance, or give me a call.

Merry Christmas!

Camille

	<i>grademyprofessor.com report for Thomas Holt</i>
★	<i>Strengths</i>
RHE 306	Dr. Holt is a real easy grader, I dont think he even reads
“nelli-ut”	anything, I got an “A” in his class and I didn’t expect that
12/12/2009	
Major:	<i>Drawbacks</i>
English	He looks at you like you were naked, he drools at you,
Education	hes creepy and hes not hott at all and you really need to stay away from him

Three nights a week I tended bar at Briscoe’s, a nice restaurant located in an old house just south of the university. It’s a quiet place: few people come there to hang around the bar, and those who do don’t stay long, just stopping in for a drink or two before heading out on the town. Most nights I spent my time mixing drinks for the diners and putting up with the mockery of the waitresses, who see me as an object for sport—a PhD and a bartender, ho-ho, ha-ha. And so I was surprised when, on a cold, drizzly night just before Christmas, Dr. Braddock came into the bar.

She was dressed in black again—sparkly eyes and shiny hair—wearing a leather jacket and another pair of expensive boots. A man was with her—her boyfriend, I guess—a big, square-headed man, dark hair going gray at the temples. He was very well-groomed.

Dr. Braddock stopped when she saw me. “Tom! I knew you worked extra jobs, but I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Well, here I am,” I said. I placed coasters on the bar for them.

Dr. Braddock ordered a glass of red wine, and the man a Glenlivet.

“Tom’s the post-doc who took care of Fred and Ben when I was out in California,” Dr. Braddock told the man. “They loved him.”

“Those are some fine cats.”

I sat their drinks down and started to move away to give them some privacy, but Dr. Braddock stopped me.

“My god, Tom—what happened to your hand?”

I tapped my cast against the edge of the bar. “Fell off my bike. Pretty stupid, huh?”

“Oh, no! Does it hurt much?”

I shrugged. “Can’t type very well—keeps me off the internet. Saves some time.” I started to move away again, but once more Dr. Braddock stopped me.

“Tom, I’m so sorry—I don’t have my checkbook with me.” Dr. Braddock looked up at me, then her boyfriend.

“Don’t worry, I’m taking care of this.” The man paid for the drinks and tipped me 12 dollars, which is pretty good, and again I started to move away.

“Tom,” Dr. Braddock said. She wasn’t letting me go. “I was wondering—I’m going out of town again next week, just for a couple of days, and I was wondering if you could—

take care of the boys again.” There were catches in Dr. Braddock’s voice as she spoke, as if she wondered if she was perhaps this time asking too much. But she was still asking. “I mean, if it won’t hurt your wrist or anything.”

“Or if you’ve got plans,” the man said.

Down the bar one of the servers was waiting for me with a drink order, staring at me impatiently. Stacy, the snootiest waitress, and maybe the stupidest and most illiterate, a girl who’d had a bad time in freshman comp a couple of years ago and seemed determined to take it out on me, the asshole. Dr. Braddock was looking at me, too, and her big lug of a boyfriend was looking at me steadily from under his expensive haircut. Three people, and two of them at least wanted something from me—and none of them, probably, respected me. The void opened up again, my old friend infinity, final resting place of my integrity, my common sense, my desires. But now in opposition to the infinite came a tiny voice, a thought: *You need to tell Braddock a goddamn lie! Tell her you have plans!* I willed myself to acknowledge Stacy the waitress: I waved. In opposition to the void the little voice said, *If you can’t lie to Braddock, go ahead and tell her to fuck off!*

“Well,” I said, after a moment. “I don’t know. I guess I’m not doing anything.”

I banished the voice back to wherever it came from. Back! Who the hell needs imaginary voices? I went ahead and accepted the void. People can’t escape who they are.

CHAPTER III

THE CONSOLATIONS OF EMPIRE

I have always liked to think that I am a careful person, that I pay attention to details, that I plan ahead for contingencies. But still I was shocked one afternoon when I swung through the department mail room and saw that the photographs of the dead professors were gone.

The dead professors: nearly a hundred years of them, eighty years of them at least, 8x10 black and white portraits of professors who had been members of our department; most of them male, of course, and fussy-looking, and prissy; some of them dull and tweedy, some with sparkles of intelligence flashing up from the past; some famous; most not. I had been in the department for over five years, and they had been gazing out at me the whole time; until they weren't. The walls of the mailroom were a dull brown pumpkiny sort of color, except for the pale yellow-white rectangles where the photos had been; an ill-looking checkerboard effect.

"What happened to the dead professors?" I asked. The only other person in the room was Drucilla Hastings, a Modernist, a Joycean. I guess I was asking her.

"What? Oh." Dru looked at the empty wall. "They took them down—I don't know, a couple of weeks ago."

And here I flattered myself that I paid attention to things. Perhaps I've been delusional all along.

"How long ago?" I asked.

“A couple of weeks? I don’t know.” Dru dropped a handful of flyers—memos, and advertisements for irrelevant lectures—into the recycling bin and plodded out, and I was left looking at the ugly, bare wall.

The Strategic Planning Committee was meeting in a high-ceilinged room off the department office, and since it was the first time I’d attended in a long time, I took a seat at the far end of the conference table, with the window behind me, and tried to be inconspicuous. Still, when the Assistant Chair, Ralph Moore, came in, I asked him about the dead professors.

“You’re the first one to ask!” he said. He seemed tickled by my question.

Ralph taught 20th Century American Lit when he taught; teaching it poorly, I’d always heard; but he didn’t teach much since his appointment as Assistant Chair.

“So, tell me,” I said. “What happened to them?”

Ken Wytowski, a Victorian, a curly-headed little man going through a messy divorce, came in and sat at the table.

Ralph said, “Camille just asked about those old pictures we took down.”

Wytowski smiled at me. “You know, you’re the first person to ask about them.”

I didn’t say anything more. There was no point in being patronized by these fools. I arranged the materials I had brought to the meeting: a clipboard with the (very slight) agenda for the meeting clipped to it, a yellow legal pad, my new BlackBerry. Bringing a cell phone to a meeting, having it out on the table in full view, might, I suppose, be considered very rude, but my boyfriend was in the hospital after a heart attack, he was

getting stents placed in his heart, and I was expecting a text or an email from him. I checked my email: no new messages.

I looked up at Wytowski and didn't say anything, and blinked.

"Well," Wytowski said. He wanted me to react; I didn't. "Well, we took them *down*."

I looked at my phone again; ignored him.

Ralph said, "We're going to use the wall space to put up artwork by the children of department members."

"And children of graduate students," Wytowski said.

"It'll give everyone a greater sense of community," Ralph said.

I looked up again, and spoke. "What? You're saying there's no community with the past?"

Wytowski smiled at me. He said, "You're the first person to even notice they're gone."

But I didn't notice very quickly; and I do try to pay attention; or thought I did.

The meeting. The Department Chair came, and the Director of Graduate Studies, and three more professors, and a token fearful graduate student. The agenda, as I said, was slight, and somewhat silly, only three items.

The first item was the annual EEO training that all university employees had to take; grad students, too. The English Department was not in compliance: only 38% of personnel had taken the training.

"It's not good," the Chair said. "The Dean asks questions."

Everyone looked glum; even me, I suppose. No one liked the Dean asking questions. After a little discussion, it was decided that Ralph would send out a strongly worded email on the listserve, encouraging, if not ordering, people to take the training.

The next item on the agenda was EDSAP, the English Department Strategic Assessment Project. From what I understood, this was some sort of pie-in-the-sky dream/fantasy/nightmare to set a course for the department for the next thirty years. Thirty years: the next generation and a half. Longer than most us would be alive, probably. Wytowski had been chair of the EDSAP subcommittee and was very pleased with his work.

“It’s always dangerous to—anticipate—changes in technology and demographics,” Wytowski said, “but I think you’ll all be very—excited—about the revolution we envision for the department.”

I looked at my phone. An email from a student; I didn’t open it. I wanted to, though: Wytowski was an ass, and EDSAP was boring and stupid.

“...the mission statement for the university, of course, says that we should be a university of the first class—and what we’re trying to do is best determine how the department can best—participate—in this ongoing quest for excellence—”

My phone vibrated: a signal that a text had arrived. I looked down and saw that it was from Clayton, my boyfriend. I opened it.

Hey baby I got a catheter jammed up my dick but I should get out tomorrow I hope

Oh, Clayton.

The third item on the agenda was a reminder that the Department's featured spring speaker would be Dr. Lonnie Sezler, an academic motivational consultant. His visit was just a week away.

"He's been on Oprah," Ralph said.

Elaine Ogren, a theorist of some sort, frowned. "We couldn't get a specialist? Someone who's actually active in the profession?"

"Sezler's written a monograph on film adaptations of Joyce," Ralph said. "And—"

"Oh, great—"

"—and I think his current project is really very important. He's trying to elevate English Studies—"

"The *profession*," Wytowski said.

"The profession as a *whole*. He fits in really well with the goals of EDSAP, and with our overall strategic plan. He encourages people—academics—to achieve happiness and completeness in their work through embracing the new paradigm of change."

I heard somebody mumble, "What about the old paradigm of change?"

Ralph kept talking. "Did you see him on Oprah? He was talking about the pedagogy of joy, and how it works in concert with the pedagogy of change. He talked about the coming pastoral university. He was really very inspirational."

"Yeah, well, some of us are still inspired by books," I said. Grumbled. It was the first thing I'd said in the meeting. No one responded.

The meeting wrapped up with Ralph urging everyone to be excited about EDSAP. The Chair ordered us all to attend, and participate in, “Introducing EDSAP” workshops; which meant that I’d probably have to read the damn proposal or report or whatever Wytowski was calling it. Wytowski said he’d email us copies, and he left.

I was sort of backed into a the corner, and was the last to leave, and I was piling together my clipboard, my legal pad, and my phone, when Ralph stuck his head back into the room and said, “Camille, I’d like to talk to you if you’ve got some time.”

I looked at him blankly for a moment. Finally I said, “Sure.”

Ralph led the way out of the conference room and around the corner to his office. It was bigger than mine, though his window only looked out into a blank courtyard, while I had a nice view of a magnolia tree.

“Sit down,” Ralph said, and he plopped heavily down into his big, padded chair and began shuffling through papers. Without looking up, he said, “Listen, I’ve got some concerns about your classes, and maybe a worry or two.”

I sat.

“Okay,” Ralph said. He opened a folder and looked at some papers. “What one of the deals is, you’ve got a student in one of your classes who shouldn’t be there.”

I sat back. “Yeah?”

“Nelda Krueger?” Ralph asked. “She’s a freshman?”

“Yeah,” I said again. Nelda: she was in my “Narratives of the American West” class. A quiet girl; she was scared, or maybe she just never did the reading. At any rate, she never said much. I said, “Yeah, she’s in my class.”

“Right,” Ralph said, “and she shouldn’t be. She’s only a freshman. She doesn’t have the prerequisites.”

“Oh.” I sat there looking at Ralph. He looked back at me. Finally I said, “So?”

“Well, she’s on your roster, so she’s your responsibility.”

I began, “Isn’t that the registrar’s—”

“No—she’s in *your* class, so she’s *your* responsibility.”

I looked at him. What the hell?

“The new Roster and Registration Oversight Program? R-ROP?” Ralph pronounced it *ARE-rop*, sort of a growl. “How professors share responsibility with the Registrar’s Office for the final roster of each class? How we put together an internal audit trail?”

“Since when?” I asked.

“Since last summer,” Ralph said. “Didn’t you get the memo? Didn’t you take the training?”

“I guess,” I said. Not. Did I even see a memo about R-ROP? If I did, I’d surely dumped it in the mailroom’s recycling bin or deleted it from my computer.

“If you didn’t, you really need to take it—the Chair’s really wanting us to get the training caught up. Makes us all look bad.”

My phone vibrated again. Clayton talking about his dick again, probably. But I didn’t look at it.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked. “Tell Nelda to drop the class?”

“It’s too late in the semester for her to drop the class without a penalty,” Ralph said.

“So you really can’t *tell* her to drop. We just want you to talk to her.”

“Oh,” I said. I got it. Talk to her and get her to drop on her own. Well.

“She’s only one of the deals,” Ralph said. He picked up a different folder and looked into it. “The others deals—like for this class, the Narratives class, for example, it looks like you’re having problems with student retention.”

Retention: at first I thought he was perhaps referring to how much my students learned, or remembered; but no.

“You started out the semester with twenty-five students,” Ralph said. “But now you’re down to only thirteen.” He paused and looked up at me.

“Well, eleven,” I said. “Two of them never show up.”

“At least they’re still on your roster,” Ralph said. “So the Department can still count them as students.”

I didn’t say anything; looked around his office; noticed nothing, except for a copy of Burke’s *A Rhetoric of Motives* on the shelf behind him. I couldn’t think of what that might mean for me. Nothing good.

“I got hold of a few of your syllabi,” Ralph said. He pulled a copy of the Narratives syllabus out of the folder and opened it on his desk. There was nothing wrong with that syllabus; I was proud of it.

“You’ve assigned your students to read nine books,” Ralph said. “*Big* books—”

“I don’t think it’s that much reading,” I said.

“Richard Slotkin, Ken Kesey, Mark Twain, Lesley Marmon Silko, Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy, James Welch, Patricia Limerick—”

“Challenging texts,” I said. “That’s what the students need.”

“Two movies. *The Big Lebowski*, *The Searchers*.” Ralph was still looking at the syllabus. Reading it aloud. I already knew what it said; after all, I wrote it, I taught it. “A midterm exam, a short paper, a presentation, a long paper. That’s a lot of work for an undergraduate class.”

“Really?” I was starting to get a little pissed. “It’s not even half of what I assign my grad students.”

“It’s too much,” Ralph said. He looked up at me, sat back. “It’s just too much. And I think that’s why you’re losing students. You assign too much work. It’s just impossible for them.”

“Yeah, for the slackers,” I said. My phone vibrated again and I glanced down at it: Clayton. Really. Great timing there, Clayton. I said, “I don’t know—I think it’s an entirely appropriate amount of work—I mean, the students who are still in the class are totally committed!”

“Well. Maybe.” Ralph shrugged. “At any rate, you’re losing students. The Department’s losing money. And this is the sort of thing that the tenure committee pays attention to.”

“Tenure? Hey, I have *two books*.” It was only now that I realized that I was in trouble; only now that I noticed that something was very wrong. And I really do try to pay attention. The tenure committee! Holy shit. Ralph sat back in his chair, eyeing me, his gray beard all pointy and well-trimmed; pointing at me. Like a gun, like a missile, like a big hairy knob. I said, “Well, one book out, and another coming out next year.”

“And we’re all very impressed with that—really, it’s a huge accomplishment.” Ralph was trying not to sound patronizing; but failing. “But, you know, the committee looks at other things, too.” He waved the syllabus. “Student retention. Service.”

“Service.”

“We were really happy to see you at today’s meeting,” Ralph said. “That was—what, the first meeting you’ve attended in a year? Maybe over a year?”

“I’ve been busy,” I said. My phone vibrated again.

On the way to Clayton’s room at the hospital I ran into Ted Cook, one of his colleagues at the law firm. He was a big man, like Clayton, coming from the office in his sharp gray suit, tie loosened at the collar. He put his big hand on my shoulder.

“Camille, we’re all counting on you to take care of our boy.”

Then he was off, no doubt back to his aerie downtown. But I thought: *take care*. And: *our boy*. What the hell did that mean? I saw Ted wave at me as he got onto the elevator, and then I turned and went up the hall.

Clayton was in his bed, staring at the switched-off television on the wall across the room. A big man, on the heavy side, his hair was still precisely trimmed, though he was stubbly and unshaven.

After a moment he saw me. “Baby,” he said, “we’ve got to get me out of here.”

I kissed him on the forehead, then sat down next to his bed. He was hooked up to all kinds of things: there was an IV running into his right forearm, the catheter tube snaking out from under his gown, there was something clipped to his left index finger, and a mass

of wires ran from his chest to one of those heart-beeping machines like you see on television.

“Tomorrow,” I said. “They said you can go home tomorrow, right?”

“I guess,” Clayton said. He sounded weak and depressed. He was still staring ahead glumly. “But who knows, maybe they’re all a bunch of liars.”

“I bet they’re not.” I slouched back in the chair, put my feet on a stool. I wasn’t sure what I should do: I’m not a nurse, I’m an English professor. I suppose I could have read to him. I asked, “So, what was the procedure like?”

“They gave me lots of morphine,” Clayton said. “Stuck in three stents—said one artery was 90% blocked.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.” Clayton sighed. “I guess it went okay. They kept me doped up.”

I sat up and put my hand on his forehead: cool, damp. My sad attempt at nursing. I said, “You’re doped up now.”

“I can’t even focus to read. I think all I want to do is sleep.”

I said, “Then you should sleep.”

Clayton, Clayton. I looked at him sleeping; wondered; worried. What was I supposed to do with him?

He loved me, I think; he said he did, often enough. I’d mumble “love you too” at the end of a phone conversation, but it made me uncomfortable. I didn’t want to lie to Clayton, even if I didn’t exactly love him. I liked him and admired him; maybe that wasn’t enough. He was a successful and interesting man: attorney, citizen, home-owner. Lover of

English professors and barmaids and small dogs. Ex-husband twice, father once. Reader of books. Drinker of scotch. Owner of a damaged heart.

I wasn't there for his heart attack. I only know what I was told: there was growing discomfort in his chest all afternoon at work. I could picture him in his office on the 19th floor, standing there in Olympian splendor, looking west out over the city, people jostling about their lives on the street far below him, the river stretching out, hills rising up on the smoggy distant horizon—my house in those hills, of course, and I wonder if he looked out and thought of me.

Probably not; probably not, at least right then. There was something wrong in his chest, the sort of something wrong that any overweight, middle-aged, over-stressed, drinking, smoking man anticipates without even acknowledging the anticipation. The heart—*now*. Something was wrong.

And so Clayton told his secretary that he was going out for a smoke, and he went down the hall, got into an elevator, went down 19 floors to the lobby, and stepped outside onto the plaza. Lit a cigarette. Exactly what you're supposed to do when you're a middle-aged, overweight man faced with chest pains: have a smoke, think it over.

The plaza outside Clayton's building is below street level, to shut out the sounds of the city, a little, and has a long fountain where water flows in rippling hissing sheets down a wall. It was a warm, sunny, day, breezy with a few cumulous clouds. Spring. He smoked, thought, made a decision: Time to go home.

At one point in my life, back into history, back before I got a PhD in literature, I got an MFA in creative writing. I had ambitions of being a writer, a real writer, a memoirist,

not an academic writer. The main thing I got from my MFA, besides an unpublishable book, was a realization of the anxious, complicated relationship of the individual selves: the self of today and the self of the past, and how engage in an endless game of hide and seek, a contest that neither one will ever win, since the landscape of time and memory are constantly shifting, constantly transforming one self to the other. We never really know who we are; or why. It took me three years to figure that out; years more to understand what it might mean.

My past self was married to a poet, a handsome, rugged guy who liked to hunt and fish and participate in other manly, unpoetic activities. One year he went off to a summer workshop and came home in love with another poet, a strange, creepy, morbid woman who he claimed understood him like no one else ever had or would.

When my self of today told Clayton that story, he laughed and laughed. He said, “Why are you so sad? That was a good thing! You escaped a trap!”

One the day of his heart attack, Clayton made some excuse to his secretary, gathered up his jacket and his briefcase, and went home. He went home: way out on the southwest edge of town; not to the hospital, a mere 15 or so blocks north of his office. It was late afternoon, and traffic was getting heavy—*heavier*, this is, after all, Austin—and he stopped and started along, listening to a Lucinda Williams cd. At home, he let his little dog, Scumbo, out to pee in the back yard. He went up to his bedroom and changed into a pair of khaki shorts and a golf shirt and sneakers. He came back downstairs and poured himself a glass of scotch; sat down, smoked a cigarette. Ignored Scumbo, who wanted to play. He

was still feeling discomfort; pain, really. He told me later he knew what it was, but he just didn't want to do anything about it.

But after a while, he did. He got his car keys, got in his car, and headed for the emergency room. Backing out of the driveway, he called me.

My then-husband would try to include me in his manly outings, but I didn't have the rhythm for fly casting and I was afraid of guns. He suggested bird-watching: I could watch birds while he fished and hunted. My thesis director was all for bird-watching, too: he was a nature writer, a bird writer—a bird brain, I later came to think. But I found birds to be nervous little creatures who were always hopping around or flying away, and most of them were small and brown, or small and gray, or small and brown-gray. I couldn't tell them apart. Both my husband and my thesis director thought I was obtuse and stubborn; and maybe I was. Then I discovered clouds: I could watch clouds. They moved slowly, and though they were always changing, they changed without the nervous energy of birds. I could identify the basic cloud types—cumulous, cirrus, stratus—and try to understand the subtypes. I liked clouds.

And so, on a pleasant spring evening, I was out on the deck of my townhouse with my cat, Fred, sitting on a metal chair, with my feet up, a glass of wine beside me, taking a few minutes to study the sky and think a bit before I went in to fix dinner.

The phone rang.

Clayton said, "Well, I don't know—I'm going to the emergency room."

I sat up; put my feet on the deck. "What?"

“I’ve got this—I don’t know.” Clayton sounded confused: that alone was shocking to me. How could Clayton be confused? “Something in my chest—I’m gonna have it checked out.”

“Fuck yes, you’re going to have it checked out.” I got up and started shooping Fred inside. “Which hospital are you going to?”

“Southwest,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. Southwest wasn’t far from his home. “Okay, I’m on my way.”

I disconnected. Poor Clayton—poor me! I’d been sitting on the deck looking at cheerful puffy cumulous clouds, wondering how best to let things cool down between us, and all of a sudden he was dying.

Now, a week later, we sat quietly in the hospital. Clayton dozed, and woke up. Voices echoed in from the hallway, where nurses and other mysterious people were out there were doing whatever mysterious things it was they did.

“Had a big ruckus here last night,” Clayton said. “Some old lady died, and the whole family went to shit.”

I said, “Aww.”

“They should have left those kids at home,” Clayton said. “I hate hearing kids cry.”

I asked, “Has Andrea been in to see you?” Andrea was his daughter from his first wife, 23 years old and working at a state agency; something of a disappointment to Clayton. I hadn’t met her until the heart attack.

“Maybe,” Clayton said. “I’ve been doing a lot of sleeping.”

“Poor baby.”

“I’m think hungry,” Clayton said. “I wish they’d bring me something good to eat.”

I shifted in the chair. “You know, you’re going to have to change your diet, now. No more heavy meat, less alcohol, more vegetables.”

Clayton pulled the covers up to his chin; some of the wires coming out of his chest tangled for a moment, but before I could reach to untangle them, he was able to do it himself.

“I like broccoli,” he said.

I laughed, “I’ve never seen you eat broccoli!”

Clayton looked up at me, stared; bleary-eyed. “You’re not around me twenty-four hours a day—maybe I eat broccoli all the time when you’re not around.”

“Maybe. I doubt it.”

“I’m the fucking king of broccoli-eating.” Clayton shifted again, uncomfortable. I reached and squeezed his shoulder. “Listen,” he said. “When I get out tomorrow? You’re going to be here?”

English 379N, “Narratives of the American West,” had, as Ralph so helpfully pointed out, 25 students at the beginning of the semester, and now, at the end of March, swinging into the home stretch, had a mere 13. Ten of them were there when I walked into the dim little room in the basement of Calhoun Hall, all juniors and seniors, except for Nelda Krueger. As best I could understand the R-ROP report, Nelda had taken composition but not intro to literature. She was a quiet girl who seldom participated in class; if I asked a general question, to get class discussion started, she’d stare at the seminar table in front of her, or the wall across from her, or maybe the tiny grimy window up in the corner; maybe,

then, of course, she was praying. Praying might have helped her grade. I couldn't understand why she'd taken the class. Still, she was there.

We were covering Albert Bierstadt, an artist I always liked teaching. The text I'd assigned talked about Bierstadt's images of empire, and Manifest Destiny, and those ideological concepts were there, of course; but I much preferred to just look at slides, look at the paintings with the students, look at them and talk about them, about those strange glowing fizzing cloudscapes and landscapes that could exist nowhere in nature but only in the imagination of the artist.

At the end of class I asked Nelda to wait up. She looked startled, but she walked slowly up to my end of the seminar table.

"So," I asked, "did you like Bierstadt?"

"The pictures? Yeah, they were pretty."

Pretty pictures. It was a start, I guess. Maybe. I remember when I was first teaching composition, in grad school, and I was only five or six years older than my students. One of my professors said, "You're so lucky, you can relate to them." I thought then, think now, *Why?* Why should I relate to them? It's *their* job to relate to me; and if not to me, then to the material I try to teach. And besides: I've always had difficulty relating to anyone; all the people I've ever known have always seemed at a distance, living out inexplicable and baffling lives. All I could ever do was watch.

Now Nelda Krueger stood in front of me. What was her life like? I had no idea. I never would. I pulled a copy of her R-ROP report from a folder and looked at it.

"They're telling me you don't have the prerequisites for this class," I said.

Nelda looked puzzled. She was a pretty girl with dark brown hair and eyes. She was wearing a blue knit shirt that was a little too tight for her; probably she'd gained a little weight, as first year students usually do.

I said, "You're supposed to have composition and intro to lit for this class, and you don't have intro."

Nelda bit her lip, a strand of hair falling over her left eye.

"All you took is rhetoric and writing," I said.

"Right," she said. "I took that from Dr. Holt."

"Tom Holt?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Tom Holt, a former student of mine. Very sharp.

"I got an A." Nelda relaxed, slumping her shoulders, resting her hand on the table. She smiled, a little.

"So I see." I looked at the transcript; my eyes fuzzed, glazed. Really, it was so much bullshit to me. R-ROP was bullshit, too. I was suddenly irked by the task they were pushing onto me. *They*: the English Department, the Registrar's Office, other administrators elsewhere. The deal was that Nelda was in the class. She'd made her decision, paid her money, and if she was going to fail, she'd fail. Fuck R-ROP.

Nelda asked, "What should I do?"

Clayton's daughter, Andrea, was standing sulking outside his door when I got to the hospital, standing with her lips all pursed up, like she was bored or angry or sucking on a lemon. Sullen.

“He’s in a really bad mood,” Andrea said. “I don’t even want to be in the same room with him.”

I stepped into the room. Clayton was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a new pair of gray sweatpants and a UT t-shirt. He brightened up when he saw me.

“Camille!” he said. “They finally took the damn catheter out—did you ever have a catheter?”

“No—”

“It’s no fun. It’s pretty damn rugged. Now they just have me sitting here, waiting to go—waiting and nobody’s telling me how long it’ll take.”

“Daddy, it hasn’t been that long.” Andrea was standing in the doorway, still pouty-looking.

Clayton seemed nervous and anxious; depressed, too, maybe. “I’m just sick of all this—shit.”

“Of course you are,” I said. I patted him on the shoulder and sat on a chair next to the bed.

“We’re waiting for the doctors to sign the release papers,” Andrea said.

“Taking too damn long,” Clayton said. “Motherfuckers....”

I looked at Andrea: she rolled her eyes and ducked back out of the room. I put my hand on Clayton’s arm. I said, “It’ll be just a little while longer.”

“You don’t know.” Clayton gripped the side of this bed and struggled to his feet. I saw that he was unhooked from the IV.

“Clayton—”

“Fuckers want me to walk, I’ll walk. I’ll walk all the way home.” Clayton stepped painfully toward the bathroom, bent a little at the waist, more shuffling than actually stepping; but *heavily* shuffling. To place the stents in his heart, the doctors had gone in through the femoral artery in his groin, slinking the stent and whatever other probes they were using up through his trunk to the blocked arteries of his heart. Now there were stitches in the entry wound, and he shuffled heavily along like a sick, old Frankenstein.

“See?” Clayton asked. “I walk fucking fine. You need to go tell the doctors.”

“Maybe you should sit down,” I said. I didn’t want to get involved with the doctors.

“I’m walking fine.” Clayton made it over to the window and stood unsteadily, holding on to the curtain.

A nurse, a trim little Asian woman in beige scrubs, hurried into the room. “What are you doing walking?” she asked.

“They told me to walk.”

“Now you sit, take your pill.” The nurse took Clayton’s arm and led him slowly, painfully back across the room to the bed and sat him on the edge.

“This is the only good one,” Clayton said to me. “The rest are all shits and morons.”

“You talk crazy,” the nurse said. “Now you take your pill.” She offered Clayton a paper cup with a pill in it, and he swallowed the pill and then slowly took a drink of water.

“Xanax,” the nurse said. “Calm you down.”

“I don’t need to be calm, I need to be home.”

“They’re signing your release now,” the nurse said, and she bustled out.

“She’s the best one,” Clayton said again. “She took my catheter out.”

“Well, that was a good deed!” I was trying to be cheerful; I didn’t know what else to say. I’d never seen Clayton like this before; never seen him depressed or agitated, never seen him angry, even. He was a big, smart guy; kind of cocky in a lawyerly way, but never rude. He didn’t even cuss very much, at least around me. And he was always in control; except now he wasn’t. Now he was just sitting on the bed, hollow-eyed and sick-looking; and angry.

“The rest of ‘em are a bunch a shits.”

I felt helpless. “Baby, what can I do?”

“Keep me from killing those shits.”

“Okay,” I said. He didn’t look like he had the strength to kill anyone; to do anything. I stood up and looked around the room: a couple of green backpacks sat stuffed on the other chairs, and all the flowers and plants and balloons people had brought him were arranged neatly on a wheeled table. I said, “Looks like you’re all packed up and ready to go.”

“Well, Jesus Christ, I’ve been ready for five goddamn hours!”

“Clayton,” I said.

Andrea came in then with a big young man dressed in pale green scrubs. He didn’t have the presence of a physician; a nurse, maybe, or an orderly. A technician?

“Motherfucker,” Clayton said to him. “Asshole. Piece of *shit*.”

Andrea said, “Daddy—”

Clayton looked at me. “This is the piece of shit that’s been holding everything up.”

The young man dropped some papers on the plant-covered table. “Everything’s set,” he said. “You can go.” He left the room.

“Motherfucker,” Clayton said.

I looked over at Andrea. What the hell? But Andrea just moved to her father’s side and took his elbow, and helped him to his feet.

Scumbo, the fuzzy little gray terrier, was happy to see Clayton when we got home, but we had to put him outside: there was the danger of Scumbo hopping up on Clayton and opening the stitches on Clayton’s upper thigh; a bad thing. Scumbo sat at the back door, looking in hopefully at Clayton.

Clayton was calmer when we got him home: the Xanax was taking effect, presumably. He sat in his big chair with his head tilted back, staring at the ceiling. Depressed-looking. Andrea bustled around unpacking: dirty hospital clothes to the laundry room, plants to various sunny spots. I felt useless.

I asked, “Would you like something to eat?”

“Barbecue,” Clayton said. “Maybe a big steak.”

“Maybe a chicken breast,” I said. “Maybe half a chicken breast—with lots of broccoli.”

“Fix me a drink?”

“With that Xanax? And all your other meds?” I got up and looked at some of the books on his shelves. Lots of fiction: Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy—Hemingway, Oates, Roth, Morrison. Big books by James Michener. Stephen King, too, and Tony Hillerman. Richard Price. History, big popular works of American history, the Civil War, the West. Biographies of Churchill and Truman and LBJ, and others. Lots of books: a library. I said, without looking at him. “We’re going to take care of you.”

Clayton snorted; but not angrily. “You’re no fun.”

Andrea came in with an armful of sheets and pillows, to make a bed on the couch.

Clayton wasn’t allowed to climb the stairs for a day or so, to protect his stitches. Andrea was going to stay with him, sleeping in the guest bedroom. I was going to do, apparently, nothing. I felt like an intruder; a useless intruder. I looked at the patio door, where Scumbo was looking in at us.

“Look at that little guy,” Clayton said. “He loves me.”

At home I sat with my cats, sat for a long time with a glass of wine looking out at what I could see of the night sky; mostly, the big patio door reflected back the yellow lights of my living room, but the band of black at the top gave an illusion of nighttime dark-sky infinity.

“Oh, kitties,” I said. “What’re we going to do?”

They didn’t know; probably didn’t even care. Fred, the yellow tomcat, lay next to me on the couch, purring, while Ben, the older gray tabby, was curled up across the room. They didn’t know, didn’t care; but they were a comfort. Fucking Clayton. Why’d he have to have a heart attack?

There were two stacks of paper on the coffee table in front of me: the EDSAP proposal, which Wytowski had sent along as a .pdf file, forcing me to print it out myself, and a much smaller stack of term paper proposals from my Narratives class. I wasn’t sure which one I wanted to read first; or last.

I reached over and picked up EDSAP: 273 pages, half a ream of paper and who knows how much toner. Wytowski's baby, this report. I guess writing it gave him something to do after his wife left him.

I looked at the table of contents: chapters dealing with the last five years in the department, chapters outlining goals for the next 30 years. Thirty! I still couldn't get over that. Thirty years: it was crazy.

I looked at a random page:

...The disinclination of undergraduates to consume and process hard-copy texts is expected to continue; this continuation suggests that the department should begin the transmission of non-text-based courses, or alternatively-text-based courses.

Adoption of web-based courses will enable faculty to interact with more students with less demand for physical classrooms....

Oh, bullshit. There were charts, too. Oh, look at the pretty charts! I didn't want to look at the stupid charts. I flipped through some pages.

...the increasing importance of the Digital Humanities ensures that the English Department will have a leading role in the future of the College of Liberal Arts.

Digital Humanities was one of those things that sounded good on paper, but often in practice left me going, "Huh?" Some projects, like the Walt Whitman Archives at Iowa, and the Emily Dickinson Project at Maryland, were truly great aids to scholarship. Others,

like the Digital Southwest Project put together by our own department, was just a waste. Helen Thompson, whose office was just across the hall from mine, had gotten an enormous grant to do something called The Digital Southwest, and all she had to show for it was some pretty pictures of Big Bend juxtaposed with some quotes from Frank Dobie. How was that going to advance knowledge or help anyone?

I looked at another page.

...auditing and assessment are crucial to the future success of the Department.

Faculty must be held accountable for the amount of knowledge and information transferred to students....

Phooey. Fuck it. Forget it. No way I was going to read 273 pages of that shit; no way I was going to really read one page of it. EDSAP hurt my brain. I tossed the report back onto the table, and the unbound pages parted and slid across the glass tabletop. Fred opened his eyes and looked at me sleepily.

I reached for the small stack of student paper proposals; eleven of them. All that was required was a paragraph or two outlining what subject they wanted to research for their term paper. Most of the time students came up with something more or less reasonable: *The Big Lebowski* as a postmodern Western, the rhetoric of William Henry Jackson's photography (a topic I often got, since it touched on some of the themes of my first book (and my dissertation), and some delusional, suck-up students thought I might like that), Mark Twain as a chronicler of the boom economy. Most of the proposals at least had an

argument to make, even if it was an incoherent or weird one; but then I came to Nelda Krueger's proposal. Her handwritten note.

i want to write about how people moving to the Western Part of the US. what people thought about it. cowboys.

Jesus, I thought. You got an A in Tom Holt's class?

In the afternoon, just after my graduate seminar let out, I went down the stairs and out the front door of Parlin and onto the South Mall. A pleasant spring day: sunshine filtering through the usual cumulous, down the leaves of the trees, a light breeze. The campus was quiet: late afternoon, and already the students were heading off to whatever trouble they could find.

The lobby of the undergraduate library was eerily quiet, and I went down the stairs to the basement level. I had never been down there before; never needed to. A long, empty, lobby-like hallway ran down the length of the building, glassed in on the west side, facing a little sunken courtyard; across the courtyard was the student union. My boots click-clacked on the floor, and then I came to a door on my right.

Through it, a warren. That was the only way to describe it: a warren of little cubicles marked off by ill-looking beige-gray-green-brown partitions, the fabric on most of them torn, stained, and tattered. The ceiling loomed down on me—on the room—chunks broken out of the no-longer acoustic tiles with a few flickering florescent lights scattered here and there. Behind me was the brightly-lit and even almost cheerful lobby.

“Can I help you?” A dumpy, dull young woman with flat brown hair looked up at me from a desk.

“I’m looking for Tom Holt,” I said. “Room 2-R?”

The woman sighed, as if she were exasperated with me. There were greasy stains on the front of her blouse. “It’s back by the wall,” she said. “I think.”

There was no direct aisle through the warren; it was, I guess, more like a labyrinth, twisting and turning through and past cubicles of people who sat there looking fat and depressed. People who sat there in the hell of the adjuncts.

Tom Holt was sitting at his desk, facing the wall. A slimy green pipe ran from the ceiling to the cement floor. Someone upstairs flushed a toilet, and the pipe gurgled. Two other people, a man and a woman, sat crammed into the cubicle with Tom; they looked at me silently.

“Tom?” I asked.

He swung around in his seat; cross, then stunned; then surprised. His jaw dropped. “Are—are the cats okay?”

“They’re fine!” I said. I tried to sound cheerful. The other two people in the cubicle were staring at me, creepily; unsettling. I forced a smile at Tom. “I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Ask me something?”

“In private.” I looked at his two officemates.

“No hablo ingles,” the man said.

Someone upstairs flushed a toilet again.

I said to the man, “Tengo que hablar al profesor Holt.”

“We can step outside,” Tom said.

“You shouldn’t have to leave your office.” I was staring back—glaring, maybe—at the Spanish-speaking man. The woman was smiling at me, a little; amused?

“Hablele,” the man shrugged.

Someone flushed the toilet again—and again. The old pipe shuddered; groaned.

“It’s better if we go outside,” Tom said. He stood up but there was not enough room for him to get around me. He stood inches from my face looking—nervous, I guess. Scared. I stepped back, into another cubicle. A chubby blond woman with acne scars on her cheeks was staring at me, too.

“It’s better if we go outside,” Tom said again. He began leading the way out. I watched him go, stared at him, his baggy chinos all saggy in the rear. Poor Tom!

Outside, on the patio, we sat at a table under an umbrella. Tom slouched back in his chair, then lurched forward and planted his elbows on the table; nervous.

“So, they really keep you guys crammed in there like that?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Tom said. “It’s not so—” He stopped and looked at me. Smiled a little.

“No, yeah, it pretty much sucks.”

“I guess.” The life of an adjunct, I realized: all those articles about the declining professorate coming to life. Poor Tom. He deserved better. “How many classes are you teaching?”

“Six,” Tom said. “Comp and intro, three of each.”

“Six classes!” I was teaching two classes spring semester. And six classes of comp and intro: how many students was that? How many papers did he have to grade? Poor Tom.

“You get used to it.”

“Really?”

Tom shrugged; a depressed, tired shrug. “It’s almost over,” he said. “I got that job at Northeast Oklahoma.”

“Northeast Oklahoma,” I repeated. Wherever that was. Still, it had to be better than teaching six classes chained to a sewer pipe. “Good! That’s tremendous!”

Tom slouched back in his chair again. “Yeah—I’ll even have health insurance.”

“Good for you!” I couldn’t think of anything else to say. Poor Tom. I pulled out my folder and opened it. “Look, I need to ask you about one of your students—one of your former students, I mean. I have her in my class—in one of my classes.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Nelda Krueger,” I said. I pushed Nelda’s paper proposal across the table to him. He didn’t look at it; looked back at the dungeon, frowning. I said, “She says she got an A in your class?”

“Yeah?” Tom looked at me, then past me. Even in the dappled spring sunlight under the umbrella, I could see him blush.

I said, “You have so many students you probably don’t remember....”

“No—no, I remember her....”

“See,” I said, “she got into my class by accident.” I paused. There was no reason to confess my failure to R-ROT Nelda out of my class; no reason to acknowledge my

responsibility. “She doesn’t have the prerequisites, and I have to figure out what to do with her.”

Tom glanced at the proposal, then up at me.

“She says she got an A in your class,” I said. “And that’s on her record. But, then, yesterday she turned in that proposal to me, and—well, it’s what you see.”

Tom read the proposal again, all 21 words. He looked a long time at it.

“I remember her,” Tom finally said. “She came to class, she did the work.”

“But she got an A? Look at this stupid proposal!”

Tom pushed the paper back across the table to me. He said, “I don’t know. Maybe she was in a big hurry or something.”

Walking up to Parlin, and I stopped short, looking at a big bronze statue just outside the door: Robert E. Lee. I stopped, and maybe noticed something. Lee: what did Lee have to do with the university? With Texas? It occurred to me that there was perhaps a connection of some sort: EDSAP, R-ROT, the adjunct dungeon, unprepared students. Lee: the Confederacy. Slavery. Treason. Was there, maybe, a connection? I had walked past that statue almost daily for almost six years, but had never really looked at it before.

Robert E. Lee. Huh.

I knew of course the story about the design of the south mall: the artist’s intention to create a sculpture group symbolizing the unification of north and south following the civil war. But the statues were all south-oriented. Some of them Texas-oriented. Was that the same thing?

Robert E. Lee. In his Confederate uniform, all bearded and noble; and white. I took out my phone and clicked on the camera function. Aimed it at Marse Robert; took a photo. And other, from a slightly different angle.

There was a statue next door at Calhoun Hall, too; Albert Sidney Johnston, another Confederate general. I walked over and looked at him, also all bronzed and in his uniform. Students came in and out of the building, passing the statue without looking. He was from Texas, at least; buried in the State Cemetery. Had an Austin high school named for him.

My phone tingled: a text coming in. It was from Clayton.

Your ignoring me

Not now, Clayton. I was on to something; something. I hit reply and texted back.

Yes, I am.

A few seconds later the phone rang. Clayton. I hit a button to ignore the call; felt a little guilty. But not too guilty.

I circled down a little bit and walked around the Littlefield Fountain, a busy sculpture featuring a winged Victory high above water-spouting porpoises and trident-bearing nymphs wearing World War I helmets. A monument to veterans of the Great War, named for an old Confederate, Frank Littlefield, who'd been in important figure in the early days

of the university. I took two or three photos of the fountain and circled around to the east side of the mall.

John H. Reagan was the first statue. A U.S. Senator from Texas before the war and after the war; Postmaster General of the Confederacy during the war. He had an Austin high school named for him, too.

I looked back across the mall and up at Lee. He had an Austin elementary school named for him. Were there any buildings in Austin—heck, in Texas—named for Union generals? Grant, Sherman, Sheridan—where were they? .

I took two pictures of Reagan and moved up the mall. The next statue was James T. Hogg, a Texas Governor of the progressive era. His father was a Confederate general. Hogg was a fat white man with a beard.

There were three statues at the top of the mall: George Washington, Woodrow Wilson, and Jefferson Davis. Southerners all. Washington, the first president, and Wilson, the first southerner elected president after the civil war. Davis, of course. I took pictures of Washington and Wilson and moved over to Davis.

The statue had been defaced and graffiti-ized several times in recent years, a focus of student resentment of its representation of the racist past, and the statue's pedestal was pale and white where paint had been scrubbed off. I took a photo of Davis, his head wreathed in big puffy cumulous clouds. I looked back down the mall. Memory was being performed here, of course. The memory would have been a different one in the 1920s, when Coppini cast the sculptures, but they were still in place, and 90 years later they were still remembering something; something. Even though the university tried to ignore it, this remained the bedrock of Texas: treason and slavery. It made sense now that I so seldom

had a black student in my classes, that were only a couple of thousand African American students on campus. I'd never really considered before what a white university this was, but it was a result of the whole history of the state. The Texas Revolution was even past beyond that, but those white guys were traitors, too, traitors to Mexico, and one of the problems they had with Mexican rule was the institution of slavery. The state couldn't get away from slavery. Tom and the other adjuncts weren't slaves, not by any means, but they were victims of the plantation-oriented economy the whole state ran on, the university, too, a top-heavy corporate oligarchy that had its roots in human misery.

In the limestone just below the statue's base was a large gouge: a bullet's scar. I ran my finger along the gouge, soft and weathered now, and I looked up at the Texas Tower.

Almost 50 years ago a madman went up into the tower with a crate full of firearms, and he began shooting at the people below, just as classes were getting out. Fourteen people were killed, 30-some wounded, and all the events of that day added another layer to the memory of the campus. The tower was open now for tours, and I was able to get over to the student union to sign up for one just as it was leaving.

When we came out on the observation deck, the people in our tour group—mostly nice white-haired ladies visiting from Dallas—all let out little gasps of pleasure, delight, surprise; I did, too. The west wind was blowing, and the city looked shiny and busy, a bit hazy with smog at the horizons.

I walked slowly around the deck. To the east were the red-tiled roofs of older university buildings, the flat industrial roofs of more recent structures, and beyond, the great hulk of the football stadium. The stadium was another link to the past: for years it

had been known as Memorial Stadium, in memory of the WWI dead; in recent years the name had been hyphenated with that of a legendary former coach. A different memory performance. Further east, beyond the stadium, were the traditional African American neighborhoods, which were rapidly being gentrified; Anglofied.

To the north the stretched endlessly, gray-roofed apartment buildings poking up above the trees forever and ever, on and on. Right below the tower was the Undergraduate Library, and I again thought of Tom down in the basement. In the cellar: I had a brief Bachelardian flash, picturing Tom in the cellar of the university's house, and me—temporarily, at least—in the garret. What kind of dream would that make? How did that locate our lives? No idea. I looked farther to the west, across Guadalupe, and the neighborhood where students once lived in ramshackle old houses had in recent years been condo-ized. Beyond that, the heavy trees of Tarrytown; and beyond that, across the river and out of sight, my home.

“Isn’t this just wonderful?” An old lady was standing next to me. The breeze pulled at her stiff white hair and her sunglasses glinted the sun at me. “I haven’t been up here in *so long!*”

“It was closed for a long time,” I said.

The lady laughed. “Oh, I was here a long, long time ago—before you were born. Nineteen-sixty-three, I think.”

“It must’ve been a different city then,” I said.

“I used to live down there somewhere.” She pointed down at West Campus and laughed again. Cheerful. “We drove around yesterday looking for where I lived, and I don’t think the street is even there anymore.”

“Everything changes here,” I said. Then I thought: Well, things change everywhere—things in Austin just change faster. Then I wondered if that was true. Maybe it was, and maybe it wasn’t. The changes that occurred were sort of layered, so that the past was always there, if you could dig it up...or maybe more like a palimpsest, something you could read if you looked at it correctly....

“Such a view,” the lady said.

To the south were the Confederate statues and the South Mall. I thought of the people the sniper shot, death from above. Wow. Behind me on the face of the clock tower there were gouges from the impact of bullets fired at the sniper—and sniper died here, too, killed on this very deck. Another layer of death and memory. Beyond the mall the art museum loomed up, a handsome building. Across MLK Blvd, the State Museum of Texas, various state office buildings and the capitol, shining in the afternoon sun. Further, the towers of downtown, Clayton’s office down there. He had quite a view, too.

I hit the speed dial and called Clayton. He answered on the second ring.

“Oh, so you’re hanging up on me now?”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Sure—”

“Hey, I’m on top of the Texas Tower,” I said. “I can see all the way to your house!”

“What a good idea!” The old lady was standing next to me again. She pulled a silver cell phone from her purse and punched away at the keys, drifting away a little bit to give me—or herself—some privacy.

Clayton didn't say anything. Before the heart attack he might have flirted, a little. If I'd said I could see all the way to his house, he might have said that he was walking around naked. Could I see his pecker? But now there was silence.

"You've lived here forever, right?" I knew Clayton was from Houston, originally, had come to Austin for his undergraduate degree—in English—and had then gone on to the law school. Then to Cox O'Brien. "Have you ever been up here?"

"No," Clayton said. "You've done something I haven't done. Congratulations."

Grumpy.

"I didn't mean it like that—you could, should, come up here with me sometime. You could tell me what I'm looking at."

"Yeah, maybe."

The old lady said, "I can see all the way to Dallas!" Except she was looking toward San Antonio.

"What're you doing?" I asked Clayton.

"Sitting here with my dog, watching Dr. Phil on TV. They've got the Bitch of the Year on. She treats everybody like shit."

"Ah." I thought of Clayton sitting there with Scumbo. Animals are usually good for cheering people up, but Clayton sounded depressed. "Listen," I said. "I've got to go. See you tonight?"

"Yeah," Clayton said. "Whatever."

I hit disconnect, then the key for my camera. I took two or three pictures of the South Mall and the city beyond. Then I walked around the observation deck taking shots from

the east, the north, and the west. Then, as I looked out toward my home, I realized that I was at the center of the city. Not quite literally, as in the center of a perfect circle—vast, irregular neighborhoods stretched out to the northwest and southeast—but I was at the center of the city morally and psychically: I was at the center pivot of the city’s dynamo, the source of everything, all the energy on display, all the layers of memory. It wasn’t the state government that was responsible for Austin, the city as it existed, it was the university. Everything I could see was created by the university—by the hundreds of thousands of active, energetic young people who had passed through it, by the hundreds of thousands who stayed in Austin, at least for a little while, building this intricate web of bars and homes and businesses and schools and stores—of life—the web stretching out to the working class households of the north and east and south, an economic web that brought employment at second and third removes to thousands of people. The university, oligarchic and corporate, had brought all this into being, doing its best to transcend or at least ignore the miserable treasonous foundation displayed on the South Mall. Everything in Austin belonged to the university; to knowledge.

The tour guides were ready to go back down again, and I followed them into the elevator. When the door closed, I turned and asked, “Is there a monument anywhere on campus to the people that got shot?”

“At the Turtle Pond,” a guide said. “Just north of the tower.”

On the ground again, I went out through the north door, through a little courtyard, across a parking lot, and over to the Turtle Pond. Red-eared turtles basked on rocks under the bright sun. Students lounged around with books and laptops. A plaque listed the

names of the dead. I took a few photos, then looked up from the pond and saw the old Littlefield House, a giant, turreted old Victorian pile, the former home of Major Littlefield.

Clayton was still sitting in his pajamas watching television when I got to his house in the evening. Scumbo greeted me at the door, excited and happy, then hopped back up on Clayton's lap. I went over and kissed Clayton on the top of his head.

"C'mon," I said, "help me go shopping."

I had volunteered to make dinner for Clayton and Andrea the next day or so, and I knew he didn't have anything in the house except for frozen pizzas and scotch.

"I'm watching Sportscenter," Clayton said.

There's no arguing with a depressed person: reason won't move them. You have to tell them what to do.

"Sportscenter will be on later," I said. "I need you to do this with me, now."

Clayton took his time dressing but eventually came slowly down the stairs looking presentable and followed me slowly out to my car. We drove past his local grocery store and got on the expressway, heading north.

"That's a perfectly good store back there," Clayton said.

"You need to get out and drive around."

"Well, shit. I'd rather stay at home and watch Sportscenter."

"I really liked going up on the Tower today," I said. "I'd like you to go up there with me sometime."

"I might jump off."

I glanced at Clayton. He wasn't suicidal—was he?

“They have a big fence up there, so you can’t get over the edge—so people can’t get over the edge.”

Clayton sat staring at the traffic straight ahead. “Yeah,” he said, “well, when I was a student, some guy jumped off the back of the football stadium.”

“Well, the team’s winning now, nobody’s killing themselves.”

“And some other kid jumped out an open window at the Architecture Building.”

“That building was obviously poorly designed,” I said. “You’re not jumping anywhere.”

Clayton sighed. “I have to go back to work next week.”

I thought of his office on the 19th floor: he was used to dramatic views. Though perhaps not from the center; perhaps his view was lopsided, out of kilter.

“That’ll be fun,” I said. “You get to go back to work! Everybody’s going to be so happy to see you.”

“I suppose,” Clayton said. Then he said, “I’ve got all this work to do, and I just don’t want to do any of it.”

I exited at Lamar Boulevard and began driving north. “Okay,” I said, “You’ve lived here forever, right? So tell me what’s different—tell me what wasn’t here when you went to college.”

“I don’t know.” Clayton sagged a little. “Everything—it’s all different.”

“Tell me,” I said. “I want to know about Austin. I’ve lived here almost six years and I don’t know anything.”

“Read a book,” Clayton said.

“There’s not much out there.” Fictional treatments, Austin as setting, in Brammer’s *The Gay Place*, or Hynes’s *Kings of Infinite Space*, or White’s *That Demon Life*, but I couldn’t find a book that narrated Austin, that told what it was or what it meant. I was beginning to think that maybe I should write one.

We were coming up on a used bookstore.

“That used to be a nightclub,” Clayton said.

“Good—that’s what I want. Tell me more.”

There was a barbecue restaurant that used to be a seafood restaurant. A place where a bar burned down. Clayton could remember some things if he wanted to. A stoplight that used to be a four-way stop. A Mexican restaurant that used to be a Pizza Hut. We stopped at a red light.

“I went to a party back there once.” Clayton pointed at an apartment complex back behind the Mexican restaurant. “There was a kid there, this Korean kid, he’d been adopted by a family from Abilene—he had the damndest accent you ever heard.”

“Okay, good.”

“He was a bible salesman. No shit. Jazz fan, too—he told me all about Keith Jarrett.”

“Yeah?” The light changed and I began driving north again.

Clayton pointed across the street. “I bought pot in one of those houses once.”

“Good!” I said. “This is what I want to know.” The past gives depth to location, even if it’s someone else’s past. “What else?”

“Oh, shit, I don’t know.” Clayton was looking out the window and shaking his head.

“That furniture store used to be a 24-hour bowling alley, and that office used to be a vacant lot. And that bar used to be a full-service gas station, and all those shops used to be

something else.” He looked over at me. “What the fuck, Camille? You’re making me feel real old. I just had a heart attack—I’m dying.”

I reached over and patted him on the knee. “You just need to think in terms of memory,” I said.

“Memory?” Clayton asked. “Please. You’re an English professor, not a historian.”

In class we were looking at paintings by George Catlin, portraits of Indians of the northern plains, and reading James Welch’s *Fools Crow*, a novel set among the Blackfeet in the mid-19th century. Discussion had been a little sluggish in recent classes, so I forced the students to speak, going around the seminar table counterclockwise, each student obligated to speak for 90 seconds, minimum.

Most began, “Well, I liked...” and then would ramble on for a bit. They liked different things: some of them liked the Catlin painting where the women are crossing the frozen Missouri River to gather firewood, and some of them liked the action scenes in *Fools Crow*, and so forth. It was an undergraduate class, and most students found it difficult to get past the “I liked” or “I didn’t like” to examine what it was about the work they liked, or didn’t. That was always a problem. But they all said something. Even Travis Smithson, who always came to class late and half-hungover, looked up from his notebook to say that he liked the part in *Fools Crow* where the Blackfeet encounter a domestic housecat for the first time.

“That’s a nice detail,” I said. I try to be encouraging. “So, what does that say about cultural perspectives, if anything?”

“Uh, that they’re different?” Travis looked perplexed, and tired. “I don’t know—that cats aren’t native to North America?”

Close enough. Travis sat at the far right end of the table. Across from him, at the far left corner of the table, sat Nelda Krueger.

“Nelda,” I said. “Your turn. Ninety seconds.”

Nelda blushed. “Uh, I guess I’m just wondering why everybody makes such a big deal about Indians.”

I looked at her. I thought, Oh, no. I said, “Keep going....”

Nelda shrugged. “All you ever do is see them on tv whining. I mean, they’ve got casinos.”

A couple of students laughed. I just stared at her.

“They’re poor,” Travis said.

“True,” I said. “You have to remember that reservations are some of the poorest places in the country.”

“So?” Nelda asked. “They just need to go out and get jobs. Like anyone else on welfare.”

“They can’t get jobs,” Travis said. “There aren’t any jobs on reservations.”

“So?” Nelda asked. “Then they need to go to where there *are* jobs. Just like anyone else on welfare!”

“But—” Travis was starting to get worked up. “But—they’ve all been genocided and had their land stolen—”

“That was a long time ago. I think they need to stop whining about that. I didn’t take their land.” Nelda was starting to get worked up, too. She’d been almost silent all semester; until now. “And what about those casinos? I’d like to have a casino!”

I said, “About the book....”

“Oh—I haven’t finished it yet. But—I liked the cat thing, too.” Nelda nodded at Travis.

“The paintings?” I asked.

“They’re okay.” Nelda looked up at the screen. A painting showing a buffalo hunt was up on the screen, buffalo stampeding off to the right, an Indian in pursuit. “They’re okay. I like them.”

“Excellent,” I said. At some point in teaching, with some students, you have to give up on the idea that they will achieve any sort of ability to think critically, that they will be able to transcend the prejudices they’ve grown up with. Teacher can’t compete with mom and dad and preacher, with television—with the culture. Sometimes, with some students, yes; with other students, no. With Nelda, I suspected, no. There’s no use fighting a lost cause.

I looked at the next student. “Jason? What are you thinking?”

Jason said something about liking something. I wasn’t paying attention. I did see Nelda smile at Travis. What was that about? A little romance? Unlikely. Then the bell rang and class ended. I called Nelda over.

“Am I in trouble?” she asked. She sat down at the corner of the table, at my left.

“What?”

“About what I said? About the Indians?”

“Oh—no.” Any teacher who takes seriously the opinion of an 18 year-old about anything social or political is doomed to madness. “I was just worried about this.” I pushed the essay proposal across the table to her.

“Oh,” Nelda said. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Well,” I said, “you could be—should be—a little more detailed. Well, a lot more detailed.”

“I’m writing my paper about what we talk about in class—people moving west.”

“That’s very broad. You need to be more specific.”

“Oh.” Nelda glanced at the proposal and then looked up at me. “Cowboys?”

“Try focusing on one of the artists we’ve been talking about, or one of the authors,” I said. “If you’re interested in Indians, maybe you could write your paper on Welch or Alexie or Silko.”

“I’m not really interested in Indians,” Nelda said. “I just think they need to get jobs and stop whining.”

I looked at her. I just felt really sad.

“I guess I’m pretty conservative, huh?” Nelda flashed her smile at me.

“I just think you need to be more specific on your paper,” I said. “You need to be more specific on your topic, and you kind of need to tell me what your argument’s going to be. You need to tell me what it all means, right?”

I was afraid she was going to tell me that it meant “they” needed to get jobs or something. To stop whining. But she just took her stupid proposal and stuck it in her notebook.

“Okay,” Nelda said. “I’ll come up with something.”

Another inward sigh for me. Okay, she said. You tell some kids what to do, how to improve their writing, and they say Okay, and nod, and their eyes are dead or scared or resentful and they can't wait to get away, even though you're trying to help them. Okay? Okay. Okay! Her loss.

"Your paper counts for 50% of your grade," I said. "I want you to succeed in this class. Okay?"

On the way back to my office I ducked into the mailroom to see if any more useless memos had come through. I found Wytowski in there with a pair of undergraduate girls tacking up big sheets of paper to the wall.

"What's all this?" I asked. "Your art project?"

"It's going to be nice," Wytowski said.

I kind of doubted it. The stained walls of the room still had those pale rectangles where the Dead Professors had been hanging for so many years. The pale rectangles peeked out from under the white sheets of paper and reinforced the shabbiness of the room.

"This one's so cute!" One of the undergrad girls held up a crayon drawing of a blue house, a yellow, ray-emitting sun, and a pair of happy stick-figure people standing outside the house. Also a four-legged stick-figure; a dog, maybe, or a cat.

"I'm sure it will cheer everyone up," I said. Wytowski frowned; no doubt he detected a trace of sarcasm. I didn't care. I didn't care for the artwork of kids, either; or for kids, period. One thing I have never, ever, regretted is my lack of children; dogs, yes; cats, yes, of course. But no kids. They're noisy, dirty, distracting, expensive, time-consuming—and

bad artists, too. I asked Wytowski, "But aren't you worried about privileging parents over non-parents?"

"So far, no one's complained," Wytowski said.

The girl tacked the drawing up. Wytowski held up another: a finger painting of blue and purple blobs.

"Charming," I said.

Wytowski faced the wall and stuck a push-pin in the corner of the painting. He asked, "Have you read the EDSAP report yet?"

"I've looked through it," I said.

"What we're trying to do, you know, is increase the overall accessibility of the English Department," Wytowski said. "Right, Carolyn?" He touched the girl on the shoulder.

"Right!" Carolyn said.

"Accessibility's fine," I said. I sat my books down and leafed through the paintings and drawings: houses, people, dogs, cats, cars. Blobs. Privileging kids over adults. I said, "We have to look to the future, right?"

I was standing in Clayton's kitchen that evening, alone, surrounded by various bubbling and steaming pots, when I heard the front door open. Clayton was in the front room, watching television with Scumbo, and the little dog began barking happily. I heard voices and walked around the corner to find Andrea standing in the entryway with another woman.

"Hi," I said.

Clayton hobbled in from the front room. “Oh,” he said. He looked at me—frowned at me. “This is Sallie.” Sallie, Clayton’s first wife.

“Well, you’re up and about!” Sallie said to Clayton.

“Sort of,” Clayton said. He turned and wobbled back to the TV. Andrea slunk along after him.

“Well,” Sallie said. She beamed at me with sort of the sadly gray teeth so common to academics. “You must be Camille.”

“Yep,” I said. “You want a drink? A glass of wine?” It’s been my experience that potentially uncomfortable situations are helped by alcohol—any sort of alcohol—and so I opened another bottle of Chilean cabernet and poured Sallie a big glass. It would give her something to work on while I finished dinner: grilled salmon marinated in rum, brown rice, butternut squash puree, and big wads of broccoli.

“I’ve heard so much about you,” Sallie said.

“Really?” I asked. Clayton had never talked much about his exes, except to mention their existence: Sallie, mother of Andrea, who taught at ACC, and Laura, an associate professor at UT-San Antonio who specialized in children’s lit. I didn’t really know anything about Sallie, and had never been curious enough to ask about her.

“Andrea’s been telling me how you’ve been taking care of Clayton,” Sallie said. “It’s good somebody is—he’s never been able to take care of himself.”

I didn’t say anything. I don’t know for sure, but it’s always seemed wise to be careful when talking to a boyfriend’s ex. Sallie didn’t seem to care.

“He’s always been halfway helpless—more than halfway. I still don’t think he knows how to do his own laundry.”

“That’s why there’s cleaners,” I said.

“We couldn’t afford cleaners back when we were first married.” Sallie leaned back against the kitchen counter and sipped at her wine. “I don’t know how many tons of laundry I lugged down to the Kwik-wash when we were in grad school.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t going to be disloyal. The grill was hot and I took the salmon fillets and tonged them on, droplets of marinade sizzling and smoke rising to the fan.

I said, “Clayton’s done pretty well, I think.”

“Oh, he’s just a big baby,” Sallie said.

Clayton came in unwillingly from the front room and sat at the head of the table, with Andrea on his right, and Sallie on his left. I brought in plates, two at a time, and then bottles of wine. I sat at the end of the table, facing Clayton.

“Everything looks so good!” Sallie said to me.

I shrugged. Now that I was finished, I found that I didn’t really care. I sat and watched them talk to each other, realizing the futility of families. They didn’t really do anything for anyone. In the end I guess that is why I was—and am—such a poor writer of creative non-fiction: most memoirs are about families, and I had nothing to say about families except to express annoyance at their dullnesses. I didn’t have anything against my parents, or against the family I married into; they were all nice-enough people, and I wished them all well. I was 24 years-old in graduate school, and I was trying to write a memoir, and I didn’t have a daddy who’d abused me, or a mommy who was domineering; no alcoholism, no craziness, no color. I tried to write a memoir, but it didn’t work. I grew

up wanting to read books and look at pictures and avoid people—my parents, my husband, my classmates. I didn't want to hang out with anyone. That never changed. Right now, especially, I didn't want to hang around with Clayton and his boring family. Or even with Clayton by himself, really; not anymore.

“This is better than hospital food,” Clayton said.

“Well, that's high praise,” I said. Sallie laughed.

“It's good,” Clayton said. He looked at Sallie. “You didn't even come to see me in the hospital.”

“I didn't even know you were in the hospital until you were almost out!” Sallie said. She pointed at Andrea. “This one didn't tell me.”

Andrea shrugged, pouty. I don't think she liked being around her parents any more than I did.

I remembered the first trip Clayton and I took together, to Tacoma for a meeting of the Western Literature Association. I sat in the window seat, Clayton in the middle, and on the aisle was a young man, an attorney who was heading to Seattle for a job interview. I fell asleep while Clayton and the lawyer talked about law and job interviews and people they sort of knew in common. I slept until the approach to Seattle when the jet hit some turbulence and I jolted awake to hear the young man screaming, “Jesus-God-we're-going-down!” Clayton looked at me, surprised, and I looked past him at the lawyer, who was all panicked and red in the face. The plane jolted again and he screamed again, screaming “We're going DOWN!” so loud that some GIs, members of the Alaska National Guard on their way home from Iraq, woke up from their exhausted sleep and stared at him in wonder. At the hotel in Tacoma, we'd been promised a room with a view of Mt. Rainier,

but all we could see were the low, depressing, stratus clouds that hung over the city, the gloomy city and the gloomy forests of the northwest. Each morning I would look out the window, only to be disappointed at the clouds and the gloom. Clayton would laugh and grab me around the waist, drag me back to bed. “We’re going down!” he’d yell. “We’re going doooooooooooooown!” We stayed in that room the whole time, leaving only so that I could present my paper on drought narrative, and, then, on the last evening, we got dressed and went up to the hotel’s top-floor bar. A group of GI medics from Ft. Lewis were in the banquet room, celebrating their safe return from the war: hard, tired-looking young men in dress uniforms with their dates in formal dresses. One soldier was with a tall woman with flowing black hair who wore a red gown cut low on her back, exposing a life-size tattoo of a mermaid. The soldier grasped her hand tight and pulled her close, even though she moved away a little, just a little, and he reached out to touch the mermaid. I sat there solemnly watching them, knowing that they would not be long together. Clayton looked at them, too, and said, “Aw, they’re just like us.”

Clayton ate with some appetite, but he didn’t touch his broccoli.

“Here I thought you were the king of broccoli,” I said.

He shrugged. “I can’t eat it.”

“You never liked broccoli,” Sallie said.

“Broccoli interferes with that warfarin I’m taking—with my blood thinners,” Clayton said. He pushed the plate away. “I thought everybody knew that.”

“Clayton’s never been much for vegetables,” Sallie said to me, a loud whisper.

“Some people change,” Clayton said.

“Most people don’t.” Sallie dropped her last bite of salmon to Scumbo.

Silence. I filled my wineglass.

“So, Dad,” Andrea said, “what was it like? When you died? Did you see the white light?”

“He didn’t die,” I said.

“My heart stopped for ten minutes,” Clayton said. “I guess that’s dead.”

I didn’t say anything. I remembered. He’d collapsed just as I entered the examining room, and I remembered how they stretched him out on the gurney with his big white belly sticking up and all the doctors and nurses and techs scrambling around, and I remember how they pushed me out of the room while they readied the paddles, and I remember how guilty I’d felt, like it was my fault for being disloyal, for wanting to be alone.

“So did you see the white light?”

“No,” Clayton said. “There’s nothing over there. It’s just black.”

Sallie filled her glass again. “You’re so cheerful.”

“She asked a question. It’s just the truth.”

Andrea said, “Maybe you were in the dark before the light.”

“You’re thinking in clichés,” Clayton said. “I’ve told you about that.” He looked at Sallie. “What’re you teaching these kids?”

“*Me*?” Sallie laughed.

“These kids today don’t read books,” Clayton said. “What’re you doing to get them to like literature?”

“Some people are visual,” Andrea said. “Some people don’t like literature.”

“Some people don’t try.”

“Are you talking about me?” Andrea asked. “I read books!”

“Vampire books don’t count.”

“I don’t know,” I said. Really, I don’t know why I was trying to keep the peace.

“Some of those vampire books can be interesting, at least from a cultural point of view.”

“You’re looking at it like an English professor.”

“I am—”

“Not a reader,” Clayton said. “Not an adult reader. Those are books for little kids.”

“I’m happy when my students read anything,” Sallie said.

“And you’re not even an English teacher,” Clayton said. “You’re a composition teacher.” He sat silent a long time, pushing around the broccoli on his plate, and then he said, “And I was too dead.”

I got an email from Ralph asking me to stop by his office, and when I got there I found him sitting with Ken Wytowski.

“Have you finished EDSAP yet?” Wytowski asked, even before I sat down.

“No—I’m still working on it,” I said. I sounded like a student. His bugging me about EDSAP was getting annoying.

“Have you read the section on computer-enhanced education and distance learning?”

“—No, not really.”

“Well,” Ralph said. “Well, I wanted to ask you something.” I saw that he had my syllabus on his desk, the syllabus for the western narratives class. He held it up. “You’re teaching this in the fall, correct?”

“Something like it,” I said. “I might play with the reading list a little.”

Wytowski asked, “And you’re aware of the emphasis EDSAP puts on interactive, customer-based education?”

“Yeah....” I was waiting for something; something bad.

“So,” Ralph said, “we’re wondering if you would volunteer to teach this class as an online, distance class.”

Fuck no, I thought. I asked, “Why?”

“Two reasons,” Ralph said. He leaned back in his chair and pointed his beard at me. “One, you’re highly respected in this department, and your participation in the implementation of the EDSAP pilot would set a great example for everyone.”

“A great example,” Wytowski echoed.

“Second,” Ralph said, “your class has an impressive visual component that could be transported and shared very easily in an online environment.”

“All those paintings,” Wytowski said. “Wouldn’t they be great to look at online?”

“They’re already on my website,” I said.

“So, you’re halfway there already!”

I thought of my students: distant and mysterious, like all people. But sometimes you could see them make a connection; see them get what you were teaching. Sitting in a dim room and talking about books was the best thing there ever was. How could you do that on a computer?

I said, “Online....”

“That’s the goal,” Wytowski said. “I’m predicting that we can move maybe three-quarters of our classes online, and then we can increase enrollment without increasing the size of the physical plant.”

I'd read enough of the report to know that was only part of it: they were also planning on letting the numbers of tenured faculty dwindle through attrition, until all that was left of the department was a few well-paid administrators and handful of silverback professors and a mob of adjunct serfs. My problem was that I wasn't tenured—yet. Once I got inside, I'd be fairly safe.

“We think distance instruction is going to be especially effective in text-intensive classes,” Ralph said. “And visual-intensive classes, too.”

What the fuck. Text-intensive and visual-intensive: what other kinds of classes were there?

At home I sat in my office and looked at the walls. For the book I'd just finished, the one on drought and memory in the Southwest, I had decorated the walls with dozens of photographs: dust storms approaching, dead cattle, dried lakes and playas, wilted lawns. They gave me something to think about while I wrote. But now that book was off at OU Press, and it was time to start on something new. I got up and began tearing down the drought pictures: tearing down, it didn't matter if they ripped, they were just things I had printed off my computer, all the raging deadly dust clouds and creekbeds baking under the sun. I took them down. The cats sat in the doorway, watching me. I filled a trash bag with wadded-up paper.

Then I started printing out the photos I'd taken of the South Mall: Robert E. Lee, Albert Sidney Johnston, the others. The Confederates. Then my pictures from the top of the tower: the city stretching off and off into the smoggy distance, all that space and place, those busy people, everything and everyone caught in a moment of transition, all in the

process of becoming something else, something new. I printed off some old photographs of Austin I'd found on the internet: parades, policemen, political rallies; tornados and floods. I printed them all off and stuck them to my office walls. Then I turned to the kitties.

"This is where we live," I said. They just looked at me. How nice. There's nothing wrong about living alone with books and cats.

I sat back down at my computer and wrote a sentence.

To experience place is to participate in memory.

Well. I wasn't really sure if that was true or not, but it was enough writing for one day. I had a few years of reading to do.

Dr. Lonnie Sezler had been on Oprah. Charlie Rose, too, and CSPAN, but Oprah was what everyone in the Department was talking about: an academic who'd been on Oprah! An academic who was almost famous—the inventor of the Pastoral University!

I wasn't impressed when I first saw him: a slender man in an expensive, shiny, olive-colored suit, his thick wavy hair swept back across the top of his head; standing at the front of the room, talking to Ralph and Wytowski and the Department Chair, he looked slick and unreliable. There were other big shots up there with him, too: the chancellor, and the chair of the board of regents, and several other white men in suits. The Dr. Lonnie lecture was a special event, so it was being held in the art museum, on the second floor, in a vast, high-ceilinged room filled with contemporary art installations and glass sculptures. Tiny

folding chairs had been set up in a semicircle facing the podium, with a couple of rows of benches behind the chairs, and a few sofas behind the benches. I took a seat on one of the uncomfortable benches toward the rear of the room, and a little off to the side; as far away from the action as I could get and still be present. Really, I had better things to do than to be introduced to the Pastoral University.

Dru Hastings came in and plopped down next to me; heaving. She peered into her massive briefcase and said, “Are we happy to be here?”

I wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or to her notebooks, but I said, “I’ve heard he’s been on Oprah!”

Dru looked over to me and smiled. “I’ve heard that, too—I’ve heard he’s very inspirational! The Pastoral University will save us all.”

I doubted that. I’d read Dr. Lonnie’s book, *The Coming Pastoral University*, read it carefully, and I knew that the pastoral university was nothing but a big lie. It engendered visions of kindly shepherds reciting poetry to gentle flocks of sheep grazing amid the rolling green hills of Arcadian Academia. But a close reading showed that the green rolling hills were not a commons but a property, and the shepherds poorly paid employees in constant danger of being supplanted by even more poorly-paid adjunct shepherds, and the sheep were not just sheared, but sheared and then sent to a slaughterhouse, and then devoured, and the owners of the property—owners of the shepherds, owners of the sheep—were not people but wolves. It was all a big lie.

My phone vibrated and I looked at it. Clayton.

Are we on for tomorrow?

Before his heart attack, we'd made plans to go for a drive in the Hill Country over the weekend, to look at bluebonnets, to stay at a nice bed and breakfast in Kerrville. Now, for some reason, he said he still wanted to go, and I was trying to put him off. I was running out of patience with his grumpiness. I punched some buttons, texted him back.

I'm in a meeting right now.

Then a vibration; an answer.

If your in a meeting, y r u texting me?

Oh, Clayton. Speak English. I put the phone down. Dru was watching me.

"You're getting to be like a student, huh?" Dru had a tight little black moleskine notebook perched on her big thigh; apparently she was a traditionalist.

Around us the room was filling, and the chairs and benches were quickly taken, and people began sitting on the floor. Our department was a large one, and even after almost six years there were many people I didn't know well; or at all. Older professors, younger grad students, men, women: Dr. Lonnie was getting a big turnout.

The Chair and Wytowski took seats in the front room and Ralph stepped up to the microphone and tapped on it two or three times. "Can you hear me?" he asked. People ignored him. "Is this working?"

"Poor Ralph," Dru said.

Ralph said something else, but one of the art installations began making noise: just behind the podium was a giant wall of video screens, dozens of them, showing, at first, blue skies. Then a bird would appear in one of the screens—a grackle, I could always identify a grackle, they were the most common bird in Austin, a big bird, iridescent black with shiny yellow eyes and great fan-shaped tails—and then another grackle, and another, until all the screens were filled with black birds. Then they began making noise—croaking, hissing, chirping—louder and louder, until they finally took off flying in a sonic blast of ruffling feathers and flapping wings. Either someone forgot to turn off the installation, or they were unable to turn it off. When the birds were making noise, no one could hear anything.

“Thank you,” Ralph said when the birds flew away. Everyone laughed. But I’d been to the museum just a few weeks ago, and I knew the birds would be back: the installation cycled through at random times every few minutes. Ralph said, “Okay, I’d like to welcome you all to our inaugural EDSAP Lecture—”

“Inaugural,” Dru said. “There’s going to be more of these things?”

Ralph said a few more words about EDSAP. I played with my phone. My Facebook profile said I had 293 friends; that sounded about right. Most of them I had never met face-to-face, of course; and I liked that. Clayton texted again.

You still havent told me if were on for this weekend

We weren't on for anything. People were applauding: I looked up, and Dr. Lonnie was stepping to the podium. He was smiling a dazzling bright electric bleached white smile.

"I'm so glad," he said. "So very glad to be here."

Dru scribbled something in her notebook, and tilted it to show me.

He ought to be glad—we're paying him \$14,000!

I smiled. I texted Clayton.

I don't know—I'm thinking—maybe might be fun—

Why was I such a liar? I did know. I didn't want to do anything with Clayton right now. I wanted to stay at home with the cats and read.

Up front, Dr. Lonnie was leaning over the podium; it looked like he was making eye contact with the important people in the front row. Behind him the screens were quickly filling with grackles.

"What we're going to concentrate on today," Dr. Lonnie said, "is the future—"

The grackles started making noise. Dr. Lonnie kept talking, smiling out at everyone, never acknowledging the grackles.

Dru showed me her notebook.

The future is for the birds.

Then the birds all flew away—

“...and, as we gaze into the interminable, infinite, multi-discursive future, what do we see? Whom do we encounter?” Dr. Lonnie paused; excited, grinning. “Ourselves! Right?

We’ll be looking back, trying to understand the situation we’ve gotten ourselves into!”

The birds were cycling fast this time: grackles were popping up on screen after screen.

“No matter what we do today, no matter what we do now, it’ll be a future mystery for our future selves to solve and understand!”

Dru wrote:

Huh?

I took the notebook from her and wrote.

The past is unwritten

Dru wrote;

It’s another country.

I wrote:

What is the future?

Dru wrote:

Not ours!

Clayton texted:

Im reading that mcmurtry book you gave me, he had a bad heart too!

Dr. Lonnie said, "...by clinging to a text-based worldview, we have anchored ourselves to a dying culture...."

The birds started making noise again. Down front, the Chair leaned over to Ralph and said something. Ralph got up and walked around the side of the room and headed for the back; he passed right by Dru and myself, but didn't say anything. I turned and watched him go out the door.

Dru wrote:

I thought he was going to bust us!

I wrote:

What's he going to do—make us clean chalkboards?

At the podium, Dr. Lonnie kept talking, despite the grackles. He spread his arms and tilted his head to the side: a martyr, a Christ. The birds flew away with a roar. Dr. Lonnie said, “We must refuse this outcome!”

Dru didn’t write anything. She just looked over at me. She asked, “What. The. Hell?”

The light in the room dimmed, and two large projection screens descended from the ceiling behind Dr. Lonnie, covering the grackle installation.

“The fuck,” I said. “PowerPoint?”

Two or three grad students in front of me turned around and grinned. I looked at my phone: no emails.

“Everybody hates literature,” Dr. Lonnie said. “And, if we’re honest, we’ll admit that we hate literature, too.”

Dru just stared at him. I just stared at him.

“All you rhetoric people, all you creative writing people, all you engineers and biologists, and physicists and historians and philosophers—you all hate literature. Everybody—everybody in this room—wishes that literature would go away.” Dr. Lonnie smiled at us with his glittering toothy smile. “And it *is* going to go away. And we’re going to go away with it!”

Ralph came back around the room and sat again at the front. He whispered something to the chair and shrugged his shoulders. Just then the birds started up again—hissing, croaking. A pair of old professors, old white men sitting up front in the row behind the chair, got up and left.

Dru wrote:

They're taking literature with them!

The birds flew away, fluttery feathery sounds; then silence. Dr. Lonnie looked out at us—made eye contact with me, it seemed like. He said, “This is a good thing—”

One the screen behind Dr. Lonnie to stage left a simple white tombstone appeared, a white tombstone on a green field. On the stage right screen, white words on black: “Death of Text.” Then there were two white tombstones on the left screen, then more. One the right, more words: “Death of Author.” “Death of Teacher.” “Death of Student.” “Death of University.” “Death of Knowledge.” And more tombstones; more, until the left screen looked like one of the old military cemeteries in France, with the dead men planted row on row. Then the screens faded to black.

Then a painting came up: Thomas Cole’s “The Course of Empire, The Savage State.” Cole was a painter I taught almost every semester; I loved his wonderful Romantic landscapes.

I took Dru’s notebook and wrote:

This is perverse!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Dru wrote:

Well, he does look like a child molester!

Behind the screens, grackles started hissing. Dr. Lonnie kept talking. I was glad I couldn't hear him. The whole painting series came up on his screen: The Pastoral or Arcadian State, The Consummation of Empire, Destruction, and Desolation. The bad thing—the worst bad thing—was that the allegory sort of made sense, if you could see the university as an empire, could imagine its development, its destruction. I wished I'd thought of it first; though I wasn't sure what conclusion Dr. Lonnie was drawing from the paintings. Wytowski and Ralph looked entranced, so it was probably a load of shit.

My phone vibrated. Clayton.

r u still meeting?

I answered.

It's a lecture, not a meeting. I hate it!

Clayton texted:

then leave

Other professors were leaving; old ones, for the most part, though a few younger people also got up and left. The audience left behind was now mostly younger professors and grad students; that is, people who were too afraid to leave. I supposed I could have gotten up to leave, and maybe I should have, but I would have had to step around or over

Dru, and she seemed content to sit there, massive and wide, looking puzzled—or amused—blocking me. It was easier, really, just to sit there. I texted Clayton:

I'm trapped

CHAPTER IV

INCOMPLETE

So there we were in jail, Barnes and myself, stuck in the same cell, on a charge of public intoxication, because of my genius, my brilliance: I watch a lot of TV, and I learn things, and I used that knowledge to talk Barnes out of a Driving While Intoxicated, and so—there we were, in jail, in a cell.

“The thing is.” Barnes stopped. “The thing is, I hate the fucking cops.”

“Of course!” Me. “They exist—they exist only to persecute the persecutable.”

Barnes I knew had five or six DWIs already, most back in the old days, the seventies, back when he was my age and nobody gave a shit about drunk driving. Nowadays, in this prosecution-mad, vile age, he’d be in prison, and his hounds would be without anyone to feed them, and I’d be without a roommate.

“Fuck the cops.” Barnes.

Up and down the hall—the cellblock, if that’s what it was called, I didn’t know the exact term, maybe cellblock was a prison term, and we were only in jail—up and down whatever it was, people were yelling: it was sort of like TV, sort of like the jail scenes in Tom Wolfe’s *A Man in Full*, but not quite: it was a Monday night—Tuesday morning, now—and there weren’t that many people locked up, surprisingly few, really, and we were in the cell, wearing our orange jail pajamas, listening to isolated yells from people up and down the tier, or whatever it was called. Across the hall or whatever was a black man in a cell—a pimp, Barnes said—who kept banging on his door and yelling, “Monique!

Monique! You out there?” as if she could hear him all the way to wherever they were keeping the women prisoners. “Monique! Monique!”

“That was really smart.” Barnes. “What you did with the cops.”

Barnes and I had been playing pool and being cool until the bar closed and we decided to swing by Stacy’s to see if she had any weed—all Barnes had was some crank back at the house—and we were headed to Stacy’s and Barnes wasn’t paying attention and ran a four-way stop, and there was a cop on the other side of the intersection. “Pull over,” I said, “just pull over.” There was a plumbing supply shop on the other side of the street, on the corner, and Barnes pulled into the parking lot—he shut up and did what I told him to do, a miracle. “Let’s just get out of the car,” I said. “I saw this on TV—they won’t know who’s driving, they won’t arrest both of us.” It was something I’d seen on a cop show: a hood ended up outwitting a rookie cop and getting away without a DWI. And though my plan kept Barnes from getting a DWI—from probably going to prison, given his stupid record from back in ancient days—they did end up arresting both of us, for Public Intoxication. But since neither of us were holding anything, it was no big deal.

“Well, I am smart.” Me. “All that TV I watch, those books I read, music—”

“Fuck you.” Barnes. “We’re just lucky that cop tonight wasn’t as stupid as the ones on TV.”

“Ha!”

I stared at the ceiling above my bunk: nothing profound with the graffiti, just some scrawls that I couldn’t make out scratched into the paint, and what looked like a huge dangly cock. So this was jail: an experience I always needed to have, I thought, something I needed to see: though actually it was turning out to be kind of boring.

“Aren’t we supposed to have a riot?” Me. “Aren’t we supposed to fight the other prisoners or the guards? Aren’t we supposed to shank a snitch? Aren’t we supposed to get raped? Aren’t we supposed to express our fucking dissatisfaction with this place? I mean, what the fuck?”

“I’m too old for more craziness.” Barnes. He swung out of his bunk and dropped his pants and sat on the toilet. I rolled away and faced the wall, to give him some privacy; also, there were some jail experiences I didn’t need to have.

“Actually, we do pretty well.” Barnes. “Tonight with the cops, and then at the murder.”

Whoa: the murder we’d witnessed six months earlier, a stabbing, we never talked about it. I don’t think we were scared of it, all traumatized and disturbed: the wallowing in blood and gore, wearing bloody clothes all night to go talk to the fucking cops in the morning. Barnes just said he’d never talk about that night, and I just sort of followed his lead.

“We actually handled ourselves pretty well that night.” Barnes sighed and flushed the toilet. “You’d think the cops would cut us some slack after we helped ‘em out.”

“We fingered the evil-doer.” Me.

“Fucking cops.”

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Barnes got out of jail some two hours before I did, even though he got fined twice as much as I did and ordered to attend some sort of group counseling meeting—something to do with his history of alcohol-related offenses. The judge was a sandy-haired woman who looked at him and said, “Mr. Barnes, you’re obviously an alcoholic—you’re just being

ridiculous,” and I know Barnes was thinking something like, “Yeah, and you’re a stupid, menopausal bitch.” But he didn’t say anything, he kept his mouth shut for once, and the judge fussed at him and fined him and turned him loose, and then she fussed at me, and called me ridiculous, too, and fined me and sent me back upstairs for two more boring hours. The jail was quiet in the morning, and cool, with only a few distant metallic bangings. I yelled, “Screws! Fucking screws!” But no jailers came to mess with me or beat me up, and I slept for a while until a turnkey actually did come and take me out of the cell and downstairs and let me get dressed in my clothes and gave me back my money and my cell phone, and dumped me out on the street in front of the jail in the bright spring sunshine. I sat on the curb to put on my shoes, blinking in the bright morning, and Barnes drove up in his car. I got in the car: there was a warm unopened 40-ounce bottle of malt liquor rolling around on the floor. I thought about opening it, but even though I was thirsty, I didn’t.

“I can’t believe they didn’t tow the car.” Barnes. He looked all frizzled gray and frazzled sitting there behind the wheel, smoking a cigarette. Tough, though, too, he looked: tough and tired.

“If they searched it, would they find anything?”

“Who knows.” Barnes pulled out into traffic and crossed the river and went south, then off under some shady trees to an old slipshod bungalow on an old street where the other bungalows had mostly all been torn down and replaced with mansions and palaces. Barnes lived in the shabbiest house on the street—the only shabby house on the street, really—and had lived there for almost 30 years, through all the changes and destruction that had happened in Austin.

When we got out of the car we could hear the hounds howling inside: the Barnes Hounds, Baby-Killer and Luddie, a pair of big long tawny dogs, some weird cross of German shepherd and basset and coonhound and who knew what else—loud crazy dogs. Barnes opened the front door—he never locked it—and the hounds bounded out and greeted Barnes grinning and dancing, then they took off racing around the balding splotchy yard, stopping to piss and shit, then racing back up—happy, happy, to see us.

“Aw, Baby-Killer!” Barnes, the hounds jumping at him. “Luddie, you missed me?”

I went in through the front room—the main room, where Barnes kept his old-fashioned stereo and his thousands of vinyl albums—back through the middle room, where Barnes slept with BK and Luddie, and back to my bedroom. Through a door, which I kept shut, to keep the hounds from eating my stuff, though I didn’t have much. I kept it simple: bed, desk, computer, rack to hang my clothes on when I felt like hanging them, two or three big plastic tubs to keep clothes and miscellaneous junk safe. Miscellaneous junk: at the bottom of a big green tub, under my socks, was a little plastic pouch of methamphetamine, crank, and I found that and laid out a fat little line and sucked it up my nose with the husk of an old ink pen. Crank::::::::::::and the fine bitter taste washed down the back of my throat::::::::::::oh yes—

Outside Barnes sat on the porch watching the hounds nose around the yard. He looked at them happily, with love, flicking cigarette ashes into the dry gray grass.

“Look at those babies.” Barnes. “They’re beautiful.”

“You’re off today, right?” Me.

“Thank god for days off.” Barnes was manager of a pawnshop, and spent six days a week arguing with people about the value of their junk.

“I’ve got to go to class.” Me.

“Like that?”

I looked down, at my clothes, at my me: I was all dirty and I probably smelled like jail.

“I’ll take a shower.”

“Jesus, kid—get some sleep, take a day off.”

The bathroom floor next to the toilet was all rotted away from years of Barnes missing the bowl, but the tub and shower worked::::::::::::::::::::and I stood under the almost sort of warm water thinking about my Tuesday class, Dr. Braddock’s Narratives of the American West, to the presentation I had to give::::::::::::::::::::*Into the Wild*, I could nail that, knew that story from my heart, had lived it, had been a romantic refugee all my life, a concept hard for civilians and other losers to understand::::::::::::::::::::when I dressed—clean clothes, cleaner, at least—and came out, Barnes was in bed watching *All My Children*: it was just starting—

“You’re really going to class?” Barnes.

“Sure.” Me. “I have to make a presentation.”

“Fuck!” Barnes laughed—ha-ha!—and the hounds looked at him. “You’re going to make a presentation? In class? Today?”

“Sure—”

“Oh, Travis—oh, my young and inexperienced friend! You’ve got to learn to transcend *that* bullshit!”

“Hey, I’m transcending.” Really: Dr. Braddock’s class was probably the only class I was going to pass this semester, certainly the only class I cared about—not that I even gave

the slightest shit about the other classes::::::::::::I basically wasn't even going any more, fuck them—

The commercial ended and *All My Children* came back on: Tad was talking to Jesse about Dixie's murder—poor Dixie: Barnes had liked her a lot. He had been watching *All My Children* since he was in high school, in the early 70s, and he was far more attached to the characters in the show than he was to any living people, to anyone except the hounds, and he'd gotten me addicted to it, too. Luddie the hound jumped down off the bed, then hopped up onto the couch, next to me: the hounds always watched AMC with us.

"You know these people I go to class with." Me. "They're a bunch of losers, they're a bunch of civilians, they're scared of everything—they'd die if they tried to do what I do!"

"News for you, kid." Barnes. "Most people don't want to do what you do."

"Kendall needs to forget about being friends with Bianca." Me. I was looking at the show. A commercial came on, and I went to my bedroom and packed up my stuff: phone, *Into the Wild*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, a notebook. Stuck it all in a black messenger bag, then laid out another line of crank and sucked it up::::::::::::

Out front, Barnes was already dozing, and he had his teeth out, looking old. Luddie thumped her tail on the couch and I sat next to her and put on my sneakers. On the television, Kendal and Bianca were talking again::::::::::::really, everything around me was soap opera—



About class: it was a lot of work, readings and papers and presentations, and I don't know why I hung in there with it, I suppose maybe only because I liked it—liked the

subject: the west, narrative, stories. I'd been west a couple of times, to Yellowstone and Colorado, and I liked stories, and I thought the trips were stories, that I was a story, that I was in a story. Dr. Braddock knew that, I think: could see that I cared, even though I was kind of a fuckup—the kind of fuckup who didn't really care too much about being a fuckup....

And so I was still cranking a little when I got to Calhoun Hall—cranking, jangling, zagging, buzzing—tired from my night in jail—but still ready to talk about the book I'd read. We were meeting in a dim room, in a sort of half-basement, some spring light filtering in and down. I had a special seat near the end of the long seminar table, a seat on Dr. Braddock's right, where I could look at her clearly, watch her, then turn to the screen if I needed to and look at the slides. It was my special place: earlier in the semester this kid named Jared sat in it, and I told him to move—told him that I *needed* to sit there, and he moved. He went around the table and took a chair on Dr. Braddock's left, about midway on the table, and from where I sat I could look down at him—from my seat, my special place. Jared was presenting, too, *Desert Solitaire*, a book I knew was beyond his ken, a book that I knew was opposed to the values of his whole life. Other people in the class were a usual assortment of students: frat guys in flip-flops, an artsy girl all in black, neatly dressed boring sorority girls. The only people I paid attention to were Jared, my enemy, and Nelda Krueger, who'd been in my fall semester Writing and Rhetoric class—a semi-boring girl, but with potential.

Dr. Braddock came in carrying the Krakauer book and the Abbey book, a clipboard and a legal pad. No laptop, so apparently we weren't going to look at slides, just have presentations and discussions. Very good: I wanted to hear what that asshole Jared had to

say, and then I wanted to step on him:.....I'd just gotten out of jail, I was a crazyman, I was dangerous, on drugs, he needed to be afraid of me—

“So.” Dr. Braddock. “Let’s get started. Does anyone have questions about the readings or about—anything?”

Nobody said anything, asked anything, people just rustled papers or notebooks or checked their cell phones that they were trying to keep hidden under the seminar table.

“All right.” Dr. Braddock. “As you know, this is the last time we’re meeting in this room—on Thursday, we’re going to meet at my house, right? For an end-of-semester party.” Dr. Braddock started passing around papers: a map out to her house went clockwise from her end of the table, and a sign-up list of what to bring went counter-clockwise. Both stacks of paper met at me, at the far end of the table, and I saw that I was still signed up to bring a bag of chips—about the only thing I could bring, really: most of the class was still underage, and so Wild Turkey was probably inappropriate—and crank, too. It wasn’t a real party, anyway, just sitting around her house talking about books or whatever, but I really wanted to go.

“My house can be hard to find, so keep your eyes open.” Dr. Braddock. “Also, your term papers are due Thursday, so bring them along with you.”

“What if we can’t come to the party?” Nelda.

“You can drop your paper off at the department office.” Dr. Braddock. “They’ll put a time stamp on it.” Dr. Braddock didn’t like late papers. “Take the papers seriously, but don’t stress about them. I’d like these last meetings to be a celebration of what we’ve achieved this semester.”

Poor Dr. Braddock: how much was achieved with these dullards and losers and idiots? Still, she tried:::she tried, even if it was only me paying attention.

“So, are there any questions about the party, or about the papers?” Dr. Braddock. No one said anything, people just looked at their notebooks or phones. “Okay, so let’s start with the presentations. Jared, you read *Desert Solitaire* for us, correct?”

“Yeah.” Jared. Fucking Jared in his little ironed oxford shirt, his hip glasses, his stupid hair slicked up into a little peak right at the top of his forehead—he frowned, looked at his notes. “I didn’t like this book much?” Fucking Jared, he talked like a girl, raising his tone at the end of each sentence like he was asking a question. “It’s about this guy, he gets a job as a park ranger? He spends a whole summer out in the desert?”

“That’s what it’s *about*?” Me. Almost shouting.

“Well, yeah?”

“It’s about values—it’s about—”

“Travis, you can ask questions later.” Dr. Braddock. Okay, sure, slap my ass back into place. “Go ahead, Jared.”

Jared read the book, at least, I guess—but he didn’t get it, no, not really. For Jared it was all about being impractical, about how civilization wins, has won, and everybody else, Ed Abbey and any other writer, any citizen who cares, needs to give it up and go out and buy a microwave oven or something. He believed in the manifest destiny of the corporation, the ultimate victory of the city, the car, and the highway—and everyone else, everyone who cared even a little bit about the world, could go off and die or at least shut up—including me:::Jared, that piece of shit—

—Yet eventually he finished.

“It’s about morality.” Me. Again. “It’s about trying to achieve some sort of—of—wholeness.”

“Wholeness?” Jared.

“When he kills the rabbit?” Me. Now I was talking like Jared.

“He kills a rabbit?” Nelda. Her contribution to the discussion: looking concerned about a rabbit that died 50 years ago. What happens in the book is that Abby randomly pitches a rock at a rabbit crouching under a bush—and kills it. And leaves it for the vultures, for scavengers, leaves it with sort of a feeling of oneness with nature and the power of death.

“Doesn’t mean anything to us now?” Jared. What? “We live in cities? Nature’s over?”

“No—”

“You’re a tree-hugger?”

Dr. Braddock was letting us argue, looking amused, pleased, looking like this was what she wanted.

“No!” Me. Hey, I like electricity, I like cars, I like air-conditioning—I even had a little window unit in my bedroom and could lounge comfortable and cool, while Barnes and the hounds were out sweltering in the front of the dilapidated bungalow. “But you know what? We should go blow up those dams, or let the terrorists come in and blow up the dams!”

People were looking at me like I was crazy, like I didn’t know what I was talking about.

“It’s like Tolstoy.” Me. I’d taken a Tolstoy class: got a C in it, but I’d taken it. As far as I was concerned, Tolstoy so smart he trumped everything and everybody. “Tolstoy was against sex, even though he knew that if sex was outlawed, the human race would go extinct.”

All the other students laughed at me: and I suppose I deserved it, because everyone is supposed to be in favor of sex even if they’re not fucking very much or are churchily against it.

“So we should go ahead and blow up those dams.” Me. Blushing—really.

Dr. Braddock wasn’t laughing at me, though. “Destroy the village in order to save it?”

“Sure.” Me. “Why not?”

“Well, it’s not very practical, is it? Even if we’re not concerned with the continuation of the human race?”

“Well, no.”

“So, as much as blowing the dams and killing off everyone might be desirable, it’s not going to happen.”

“Should.” Me. Not giving up.

“But won’t. But think about this—what about the concept that wildness is an important part of the human condition? That we need nature?”

“You don’t need nature to be—”

Dr. Braddock held up her hand. Shushed me—slapped my ass back into place again.

“We’ll get back to you in a minute, Travis. What does anybody else think? Do we need wildness?”

Everybody in the room looked down—at the table, at the floor. Nelda, I saw, was looking at her lap—at her cell phone, probably.

“Anybody?”

Of course, Jared didn’t have anything to say, and this was his presentation—or was supposed to be. Nobody had anything to say: I had things to say.

“Jenna?”

Jenna—a boring girl. She flinched. “Well—I don’t know. We went camping once—it was hot out. But if you want to go to the park, or something, that can be nice....”

Dr. Braddock sighed. I saw it. “Travis?”

“You don’t need wilderness to be wild.” Me—speaking very quickly in case she shushed me again. “All you need is the concept—”

“Which leads us into your presentation.” Dr. Braddock, smiling at me. “*Into the Wild.*”

Okay: my turn: *Into the Wild*. I looked down at my notebook suddenly a little nervous, maybe confused. Not as jangly as I had been, though, for good or for ill. *Into the Wild*, by Jon Krakauer. Most of the people in the room had at least seen the movie, so I didn’t have to describe the plot too much: Chris McCandless, this kid, goes wandering around the US, trying to find himself, looking; his asshole parents he cuts off out of his life and leaves behind; his trip to Alaska, his death. Actually, I guess I talked about the plot more than I should have, because Dr. Braddock stopped me.

“But why was he looking for his *self* in the *wild*?”

“He was wrong—he was mistaken.” Me. Catching my breath. “You can find yourself in the city as easily as you can in the wilderness. Wild is everywhere. Maybe he just liked trees.”

“Still, it’s horrible what he did to his parents.” Jenna. “Not letting them know where he was.”

“Aw, he should’ve dropped a fucking bomb on their heads!” Me. Several people looked shocked. I smacked the table with my hand. Bang! “A bomb! He didn’t owe them anything!”

Nelda looked at me. “His *life*.”

“He didn’t ask to be born!”

“I don’t know.” Dr. Braddock. “I remember when I was an undergraduate, and I took off for a semester in Mexico, and I never told my parents. All the time they thought I was safe in Northfield, and they were scared and hurt when they found out I wasn’t.”

I wasn’t going to diss her parents—not to her face, at least. But she didn’t owe them anything, either. Not even her life.

“He could have at least given them a phone call.” Nelda.

“That wouldn’t have stopped him from dying?” Jared. Was he taking my side? Why?

“Looking out over the edge of a cliff doesn’t mean anything if you’re tied to a rope.” Me. “Calling home ruins everything.”

“The wild would be just as wild.” Dr. Braddock. “In the end, though, I’m not so interested in his parents. But what about all the people he met on his travels? All the people he touched—the old man, the people he worked with on the farm.”

“They’d be just as touched even if he didn’t die?” Jared.

“Maybe it took his death for them to realize they’d been touched.” Me. “Or maybe they just made up being touched—maybe they’re just a bunch of liars.”

“What does it say about networks, though?” Dr. Braddock. “About how we’re connected in life? Or are we connected in life? Is there some larger issue going on here?”

Nobody said anything—everybody looked at the floor, except Nelda, who looked at me.

“Isn’t that pretty much what both these books are getting at?” Dr. Braddock. “The integration of wildness into the human experience?”

Everyone sort of nodded: if Dr. Braddock wanted us to take that from the books, we would, I guess. I was feeling drained—suddenly— and I didn’t have much else to say, and class was about over, anyway. People began gathering up their books. Dr. Braddock stopped me just before I left the room.

“So, Travis—you seemed to be really personally involved in these books today.”

“Sure.” Me—blushing again. “Aren’t we supposed to be?”

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I slept most of the rest of the afternoon and on into the middle of the evening. Dark out when I woke up, and Barnes was not at home—off out getting drunk or shooting up, probably. I threw some food down for the hounds and then let them outside. I was hungry, too, and still tired—but I sat in my chair at my desk and looked at the computer: no interesting emails, nothing on Facebook—my phone showed no missed calls—nobody was interested in me. I looked at the pile of books on my desk: I had to write a paper. Dr. Braddock’s paper: something about the relationship between the photographer William

Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran, and their trip to Yellowstone. Something. I had a biography of Jackson—and I had Dr. Braddock’s book. Didn’t have a paper, though. Wasn’t going to write it tonight, either.

Outside, Baby-Killer was barking at something.

“Shut up!” Me. No paper tonight, no way. I got the crank out of my sock box and laid out a line. Now Luddie was baying too. I went to the back door and stuck my head out. “Hounds! Get back in here!”

Oh—a little crank was fine—no more lethargy:::::Just a little jangle, not even enough to stop my appetite. I was hungry, and I needed to eat: the wonderful friendly cells of my body were asking, politely, for more than methamphetamine and beer. And, hey, I listened to my body.

“Okay!” Me. I got up and went to round up the hounds.

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I found Barnes at the Chili Parlor, sitting at the bar with Crazy Larry.

“Oh! Here’s my cellie!” Barnes. Smiling, craggy face all lit up. Pleased to see me. “I was telling Larry about our adventures in the prison-industrial complex.”

“It was a triumph.” Me.

“Being in jail?” Crazy Larry. He was a slender black man with frizzed-out hair, an orderly at the state hospital. “Some triumph. I guess there’s black people triumphing all the time in this town, huh?”

I ordered a beer and stepped aside to watch Barnes—he was leaning back on his barstool, rocking back and forth, rocking—

“—and so the turnkey comes up and starts banging on the cell door—he’s yelling, ‘You pieces a shit, you’re the people who’s been ruining this town!’ and all, and I said, ‘Yeah, motherfucker, I’ve been ruining this town for thirty years now, and I’m gonna keep on ruining it until you fucking *die!*’”

“Yeah, you did, sort of.” Me. “Kind of.”

“This is my fucking town!” Barnes. Stretching his arms out like he was being crucified, or maybe waving a helicopter in for a landing. “Fucking screws.”

I was still jangled a little, a little:::but not too much, and hungry. I looked around and saw Dr. Broughton, a history professor I knew, sitting alone at a table by the front windows—alone, his wife had left him, or something, a few months earlier, and we would see him out and about all the time: if not at the Chili Parlor, then at the Tavern, or at the Little Wagon, drinking and watching basketball games, and I suppose unless he got a girlfriend or his wife came back, he’d soon be watching baseball in the bars, and then football—which is really not too bad a way to go through life, I thought. Broughton saw me looking at him, and he waved me over.

“So—you staying out of trouble?”

“*Hell* no.” Me. I sat down across from him. “I was in jail last night!”

“Oh, yeah?” Broughton. He looked like he was amused—he always seemed to think I was pretty funny. The class I’d had from him in the fall, The History of the Atomic Bomb, had been in the morning—late morning, 11:30, but morning all the same—and every class I’d made it to I’d had a hangover, or been half-loaded from staying up all night—and still I got an A.

“It was ridiculous!” Me. “It was crazy!”

“No doubt.”

A waitress came by and I ordered a large Frito Pie with XX chili, and another beer and a glass of ice tea, too, and I told him the story: Barnes running the stop sign, the cops, the jail, people screaming all night, Barnes arguing with the turnkey—me laughing the whole time, and then the waitress brought me my chili and drinks, and I took a breath.

“And then—I gave a presentation this afternoon in my English class.” Me. I smashed the chili into the corn chips.

“How’d you do?”

“I don’t know. Good, I guess—I read the book, at least.”

“That always helps.” Broughton. “What about your other classes?”

“Oh, I sort of dropped them.”

“Sort of?”

“I stopped going.” Me, eating. I was hungry! “I’ll show up for the finals, take the tests.”

“You’re going to flunk out!” Broughton, laughing. “They’ll ask for your financial aid back.”

“Well, they can ask.”

Broughton laughed again. Then he noticed the biography of William Henry Jackson I was lugging around—I brought it along with me thinking maybe I could make some notes at the bar, or something. “What’s that thing for?”

“A paper.” Me. I took a long drink of beer, and then of ice tea. “Paper about Jackson’s photographs of Yellowstone. But I don’t like my topic.”

Broughton took the book and leafed through it, looking at all the pictures—Mount of the Holy Cross, View from Toroweap: old lost worlds almost forgotten, the West in black and white, caught forever, nothing now and gone.

“What’s your topic?” Broughton.

“I don’t really have one.” Me. “That’s why I don’t like it.”

“Ah.” Broughton. He’d been teaching a long time: he’d had hundreds and hundreds of students over the years, and I suspect he’d heard this before, no doubt.

I tried to explain the paper to him—the idea for the paper: Jackson and Moran, great photographer, great painter, both on the 1871 Hayden Expedition to Yellowstone, the expedition that didn’t exactly discover Yellowstone, but mapped it and made it known and resulted in the formation of Yellowstone National Park.

“So what?” Broughton. “That’s what you have to answer—why is this important? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know.” Me. A lie: I did know—it was all in Chapter Seven of Dr. Braddock’s book, how Jackson’s and Moran’s images helped shape what people think of when they think of the West—or, at least, of Yellowstone. When I started thinking about the paper, I thought she might like it that I’d read her book. Now I wasn’t so sure, now I was afraid she might think I was a suck-up, and I didn’t want to tell anybody, and I didn’t even want to write the paper anymore.

“Maybe I’ll change my topic.” Me.

“Change your topic to what?”

“I don’t know—I’ll come up with something.”

“When’s the paper due?” Broughton. He closed the book and looked up at me.

“Thursday.” Me. “I’ll come up with something.”

“You’re crazy!” Broughton. He laughed at me again. The waitress came around and he ordered more beers. “You’ll never get it done.”

“I like the pressure.” Me. “I work well on the brink.”

Barnes came over and sat down heavily. When Broughton split up with his wife, Barnes kept bugging him to come by World of Pawn someday and hock his wedding ring, to turn his back on the past, to soak the ring and use the proceeds to do something useful, like get loaded.

“You’re leading this kid into bad habits.” Broughton. “Jail!”

“It’s part of my educational process.” Me.

“He’s just a roommate.” Barnes. “He pays his rent, he does what he wants—we got no in loco parentis going on here.”

“Loco’s about right.” Broughton. “The both of you.”

Barnes was older than me, of course—older even than Broughton—but it was fun for me and good for me to hang around with someone who had his shit together, even if he was a drug addict and a ne’er-do-well. A few days earlier I’d stopped by the condo where I’d lived before—my old roommates were there, walleyed college boys sitting around watching Sportscenter, listening to lame country music, dirty clothes rotting in piles until they could bag everything up and take it home for mommy to wash, old roommates Chad and Jerry looking at me kind of scared, clutching their iPhones to their chests, wary. I was jangled quite a bit that evening, velocitized, talking fast, sweating, trying to get them to move faster—go, go, go, go, go—trying to get going so we could get downtown and catch a band, the boys sitting in that big room, in that condo Chad’s father had bought for him,

sitting in the room with all their toys—skateboards, bicycles, computers, wii, flat screen TVs—the room much neater and cleaner and tidier since I’d left, kicked out in all but name, my behavior so disturbing to them, so unnatural, so unnerving, that they recoiled, all those years of DARE propaganda they’d listened to in school kicking in—they sat there, dawdling when they should have been bolting—and I knew—knew—that I was so, so fucking lucky to have my dark little room with the window unit in the dilapidated bungalow with Barnes and the hounds. I had a home!

Now Barnes and Broughton were arguing over World War II; Broughton wasn’t a military historian, his specialty was the history of science, but if you’re going to be a scholar of the atomic bomb and atomic science, you’ve got to know about Curtis Lemay and the XXI Bomber Command, and Barnes was a big Curtis Lemay fan—he was a big air force fan, period, and the front room of the ramshackle bungalow, the room shut off from the hounds, held his model airplane collection, an air armada he’d been working on for forty-odd years, little plastic and wood planes covering every surface in the room—his desk, his work table, hanging from wires dangling off the ceiling, stuck to the walls, photos of bomb damage from seven or eight wars. During one argument with Broughton, Barnes announced that he was going to spray the ramshackle bungalow for roaches on August 6, to commemorate the bombing of Hiroshima, and he asked if that made him a racist. “Yeah, pretty much,” Broughton said, and Barnes laughed and said something like how we all carried the fires of Armageddon in our hearts. Broughton was amused, like always: just like he was amused with my craziness, he was amused with Barnes’s obsessive antiquarianism—for Barnes was an antiquarian: it showed in the music he listened to and the drugs he took—he was like a Civil War reenactor who was so into his cult that he’d not

only live on hardtack but try to own a slave or two, too: Barnes lived his obsessions. But Barnes was crazy, crazier than me, and crazier for a far longer time, and he could scare people with his starting startling green eyes and his loud voice and weird laugh: it was obvious that he was *on* something or had been on something or would soon be on something—his enthusiasms over borderline weirdnesses like atom bombs, college basketball, model airplanes, old rock’n’roll, motorcycles, LSD and heroin (a weird mix right there)—all crazy obsessive things! Fucked up on heroin or crank or vodka or acid, never never stopping talking, ever—I remember bringing him by the condo once, before I was kicked out, Chad and Jerry cowering in fear, their girlfriends—the girls they hung out with, anyway, and might have fucked a time or two—cringing back, too, while Barnes was in the bathroom pissing with the door open, pissing into the sink while he stared at his reflection in the mirror, like he was hypnotizing himself, while he pissed on and on and on and on and on and on.... “Don’t bring him around here again,” Chad whispered after a while. “I live here, too,” I said, but I didn’t for much longer.

Broughton was a serious guy, an academic at a big university, but he had a sense of humor: he could see the point of Barnes and Barnes’s project—his life—which was maybe similar to the project I was working on, too: anachronistic, antiquarian, fucking nuts.

“It was the B-29B model that was specially configured for Lemay’s firebomb attacks.” Barnes. “Get rid of the 50-cals and those babies could carry more ordinance, burn more cities, lay more waste, bring America to the world.”

“That’s all in the Michael Sherry book.” Broughton. “The Rhodes book too—and elsewhere.”

“Sherry is better on the development of the theory of aerial warfare—”

“Guilio Douhet.” Me. Hey, I got an A in that class.

“Both those guys spend too much time on the implications on the Bomb.” Barnes.

He’d been a grad student in American Studies at one time: a semester and a half in 1979 or so, before he got busy being crazy. “All I want is information about the hardware.”

“C’mon, the implications are what’s important.” Broughton. “The hardware’s just the romantic part.”

“Huh?” Me. “If you can romanticize the atomic bomb...” But I thought: I’m a romantic, though, and I’m a bomb. Right?

“All the implications—the rise of the national security state, big government, big industry, big science, big universities—”

“And big science in the big universities!” Barnes. “Ha! They’re all squeezing out the humanities—you’re doomed!”

“Not science so much.” Broughton. “Big business is the real enemy, the way they’re bringing this fucked-up consumer ethos into the classroom—they want to turn us into goddamn shopkeepers.”

“Just part of the ongoing changes.” Barnes. “This used to be a college town—now it’s, I don’t know, just some big fucking thing.”

“Oh, don’t start crying about old Austin.” Me. Really, it was boring listening to old people whine about the Old Days.

“No, it was different.” Barnes. “Broughton knows this. Like, the university used to let people come in and run on the track—now they moved the track out of the stadium to a new place, and they put a fucking fence around it.”

“I bet you ran on the track a lot.” Me.

“Chasing hookers, maybe.” Broughton. “But, yeah, you’re right—the university’s separated itself from the community, built a fence. That’s the corporation talking. Shit, they even kicked the state historical association off campus.”

“Who cares about Texas history?” Barnes.

“Not the university.” Broughton.

“But.” Me. It was like I was caught in a crossfire: Barnes hated the university because he hadn’t made a life there, and Broughton hated the university because he had. “But what difference does it make for a student? So what if some bum can’t come in and run laps on the track?”

“The corporation’s going to give you larger sections, more online classes, less-qualified teachers.” Broughton. “You might notice, maybe not. Most kids are only here for four years, not long enough to see a difference.”

“Students are stupid.” Barnes.

“Hey!” Me. Though I suppose he was right about everyone else besides me.

“Ignorant is probably a better word.” Broughton. “Students don’t really know what professors do, or what the university does.”

“Which is your own fucking fault.” Barnes. “You’re all up in that ivory tower, whacking off—”

“You.” Broughton pointed across the table at me. “You’re going to be one of the last people to get an education here, before they break up the university and really turn it into a business.”

“Education’s overrated.” Barnes. He had a depraved hard laugh, like a parrot: *ha-ha!*

“Who needs an education when you can get the History Channel on basic cable?”

“The Military Channel.” Me.

“The fucking Military Channel!” On days off, Barnes would usually spend all day with the hounds watching *The World’s Deadliest Aircraft* or whatever for hours and hours, occasionally getting out of bed to shoot up or roll a joint. “Somebody needs to drop a bomb on the college, get you parasites out doing useful work, like plumbing or fixing cars.”

Barnes was always mad at the university. I sat back against the window and looked over at the bar to see if there was anyone else hanging around that I knew—but nobody interesting had come in. A week earlier at closing time a woman saw me standing around at closing time and offered me a ride home—we’d been talking a bit earlier, about something weird, I suppose, but I was barely paying attention to her, and then she thought I needed a ride. My car was parked right across the street, but I said Sure, and she reached over and started adjusting my willie before we got around the block to Guadalupe—but she didn’t want to go inside the dilapidated bungalow when we got home: the hounds were at the front door, howling and jumping around, scratching at the screen, and she was afraid.

“Those are some big dogs!”

“Hounds.” Me. “They’re sweethearts!”

“They’re scary.”

So we fucked right there, on the front seat of her car, a tangle of jeans and underwear and banging into the damn steering wheel, Baby-Killer and Luddie baying inside the house, and I looked down once and the woman was looking up at me with crazy eyes, and there was a flash of light and it was Barnes getting back.

“Oh ho!” Barnes. Standing outside the car with his weird parrot laugh, and the hounds were suddenly surging and leaping around and we finished and I got out and the woman drove away and Barnes stood there laughing at me. “Travis, you are a dog!”

“Aw.” Me. A little breathless.

“You guys should have at least crawled into the back seat!”

“Too much trouble.”

Inside Barnes was going through his record collection: thousands and thousands of old vinyl albums. His speakers and his turntable were new and top quality—he was a pawnbroker, after all—but the amplifier and the records were ancient, antiques, Barnes the antiquarian—the amp actually was actually ten or fifteen years older than I was, and it ran on tubes, vacuum tubes, and it got hot when it played, got hot and glowed. Barnes dropped side one of *Exile on Main Street* onto the turntable and cranked the volume, and the rest of the set list was lined up, nothing newer than 25 years old: Clash, Buzzcocks, Stranglers, Paul Revere and the Raiders—all old rock’n’roll, oldish at least—Joan Jett, Jackson Five, Husker Du—and I got mugs of vodka from the kitchen and a package of speed from the bedroom, and the records played and the hounds jumped around and Barnes jumped around and I jumped around—and this, really, I thought, this is what life should be like all the time: booze, drugs, fucking, rock’n’roll, jumping around all night for no good reason—forever—

But now the waitress came with more beers, and Barnes ordered a round of shots, some sort of awful ginger brandy that no one else drank except when he was buying, and Crazy Larry came over and sat with us, and some other people, and Broughton finally got up to leave and he squeezed me on the shoulder as he left and he said, “Good luck with the

paper.” The paper: I hadn’t thought about it in hours, it seemed like, even though the biography of Jackson was still there on the table—Larry was looking through the photographs—and I didn’t want to think about it, and didn’t want to write it, either: it was a stupid topic.

“So—what do you think?” Me, looking at Larry. “Is that interesting at all?”

“They were doing some hard travelling back in those days.” Larry. “They didn’t have roads or trucks or anything to haul that shit around.”

“Jackson was a bull-whacker.” Me. About the only thing I could remember from the book, and that was only because it sounded like he was masturbating. “But, yeah—those cameras were huge—they had tons of shit to pack around.”

Then the lights went up in the bar: closing time. We straggled out into the night, Barnes and Larry and myself, and the other drunks, into the cool night, the capitol dome pale white rising above us, all the streetlights reflecting up into the sky, cars heading back to the university—closing time all over town, drunks and crazy people heading home. I took a deep breath: tired, tired, now, but I had work to do.

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How about:

Travelling into the Yellowstone Country was a hard task—up into the wilderness with spouting geysers and misting steams and hauling tons of equipment slung on packhorses and mules and wagons groaning and scared of Indian attacks and the unknown of hell and with Ferdinand V. Hayden leading the way to

discovering what was there. Except other people were already there, setting up hotels at the healthy hot springs to make money off tourists—so it wasn't really a wilderness at all....

No! Who wanted to read 12 pages of that shit? Not me. I needed some sleep, and I crawled into bed and shut out the light.



In the morning it didn't get any better.

Riding up into the mountains, draggle-slagging and bull-whacking behind their leader, Thomas Moran and Wm Henry Jackson didn't know that they were on their way to demonstrating a new understanding of American nature. And their leader—Ferdinand V. Hayden—leading them further and further away from what might be called civilization into the labyrinth of time and mountains that would one day be called Yellowstone....

And—no. No! Three more hours of sleep. Or five.



Dr. Holt's office was down in the basement of the undergraduate library, in a big wide room with a low ceiling whose tiles were all half-broken and stained with urine or whatever was flowing down from upstairs—a crowded room, a sad room where you expected to see cancer-riddled mutants with red glowing eyes sitting in the shadows

grading papers. Holt was sitting slumped at his desk, staring straight ahead at a leaking sewer pipe.

“Hey, Dr. Holt.”

He jerked around. “What?” He looked at me. “Huh?”

“Remember me? I was in your—” Fuck, I couldn’t remember the course number.

“Your, uh, class last fall.”

“Yeah.” Holt. He stared at me, not like he was scared, or pissed, but like he didn’t know who I was or what I wanted, or why I wanted anything—a tired stare, and then he looked past me at the cubicle wall, and I turned and looked, too, but all I could see was a poster for an old movie, *The Paper Chase*. Holt looked at me again, and sighed, and sank back into his chair. “It’s too late to complain about your grade.”

“What?” Me. “I got an A.” What the fuck?

“You did?”

“Yeah!”

“Well.” Holt slouched down some more.

“I just wanted to talk to you a minute.” Me, smiling. “Are you busy?”

Holt opened his mouth, then shut it. Just then Jennifer, his officemate, came pushing by me into the cubical. I smiled at her, too: I’d had second semester Spanish from her.

“Hola, Professora!”

She looked at me. “Hey, Señor Travis! Como esta?”

“Uh—pretty good.” Me. “I forget—”

“C’mon, you need to practice! How are you going to speak to people when you visit Mexico?”

“I’ll take you with me?” Me. Of course, I’d probably end up in jail for real if I ever went to Mexico. “You can be my translator!”

“Ha!”

“You wanted to speak with me?” Holt. Now he was looking kind of pissed.

“Yeah, if you have a minute.”

“Let’s go outside.” Holt got up and left the cubicle, and I waved goodbye to Professora Jennifer, and I followed him back through the dingy low-ceilinged room and out to the patio, bright sunshine and breeze. We sat at a big table shaded by an umbrella.

“So—is there some problem?”

“Aw, no.” Me. “I kind of wanted some advice—about a paper.”

“A paper.” Holt was staring at me again. “A paper we did last semester?”

“No, a paper I’m writing this semester—for a different class, for a class I’m taking this semester.”

“I’ve got—” Holt sagged again. “I’ve got, like, 180 students.”

I thought: one more won’t hurt. Then I remembered what Broughton had been saying, how the corporatists were ruining my education. And now here was the proof: poor Dr. Holt and his unfortunate 180 students.

“That’s too many.” Me.

“Yeah—”

“I know this history professor, Pete Broughton? He was telling me that the humanities are getting totally screwed over—classes are too big, you don’t get paid enough—”

“Yeah, no kidding.”

“So.” Me. I was trying to think fast. Some crank would have helped. “So, I don’t know—here’s your chance to fight back. Subvert the corporation. Do your job—educate.”

He laughed at that. “Oh, come on.”

“No—I’m serious.” I was pretty sure I was serious. “You can change the fucking world.”

He didn’t say anything, though—didn’t even look at me. I sat there waiting for a bit. My mother always told me to go ahead and ask people for things—they can always say no.

“It’s for Dr. Braddock’s class.” Me. “I just wanted to run some ideas past you. It’s no big deal.”

Holt looked like he was in pain.

“You always said to talk though our essays when we got stuck.” Me. “So—I’m really stuck.”

“Have you talked to Dr. Braddock about it?”

“Naw, her office hours—I can’t come in then.” They were in the morning.

Obviously, I couldn’t come in then. “But she wrote on my proposal.” I pulled out everything from my messenger bag—Peter Hale’s Jackson biography, Dr. Braddock’s book, Goetzmann’s *West of the Imagination*, my notebook, a folder with a bunch of papers. I pulled the proposal from the folder—looked at it—then pushed it across the table to Holt.

“Look to my book’s works cited for some sources.” Holt, reading. “She wants you to write something original.”

“Yeah.” Me. That was the problem—originality. She already wrote the fucking book. “But, you know, I really don’t like this topic.”

“Then why write it?”

Fucking Holt. Sitting across the table from me: it was easy for him: no pressure at all, no paper due the next day, no other classes to be maybe failed, no tiredness, weariness, weirdness—nothing looming over him, no nothing—

Holt took the Goetzmann book and began looking through it. “So, why’d you want to write about this, anyway?”

“I thought maybe she’d like it if I read her book?”

“She’d like it better if you could write a good paper.” Holt. He wasn’t even looking at me, he was looking at pictures in the book. From where I sat it looked like a Remington painting.

“Yeah?” Me.

“About something you care about.”

Well, shit. What did I fucking care about? That was the whole problem—with everything, really, with my whole goddamn life—what I cared about. I started college as a journalism major, then switched to history because journalists were stupid, then switched again, to English. Basically, all I wanted to do was read books and bullshit about them and then fuck around at night and get loaded. What was the harm in that? I suddenly hated William Henry Jackson, I wanted to go back in time and bull-whack him, the piece of shit. His photographs were interesting, but so what.

“I really liked your class.” Me. Suddenly depressed, feeling the paper deadline looming, the certainty of failure.

“You’re about the only one.” Holt. He was still looking at the book: a photo of prostitutes posing on a hilltop, with the San Francisco fire burning in the distance. “My evaluations sucked.”

“Really? I got a lot out of it.”

“Yeah? You must have been absent the day I told people not to wait until the last minute to write their papers.”

Well, shit. Again. Maybe I could show Dr. Braddock the page or two I’d tried to write, and she could give me an incomplete. The other classes I had—well, shit, there, too—but I could probably come in and take the finals and do fine, just based on the reading. Maybe. Sure I could—

“Don’t worry about it too much.” Holt. “Everybody writes their papers at the last minute.”

“Of course.”

“Nobody wants to admit that, though. Everything we do is a big lie.”

I shrugged, looked at the Jackson book sitting out on the table top. There had to be a way I could get it done—it was only a 12-page paper, and even if I took two hours a page, I could get it done in time to take it to Dr. Braddock’s. Plus, I already had two bad pages already written—and a works cited. So, I only had to write nine pages in under 24 hours. I could do that!

But I still had to figure out what I was going to write nine pages about. Fuck you, William Henry Jackson.

“How much is nine divided by twenty-four?” Me.

“What?”

I could do it—I pulled out my phone and punched in some numbers. The result didn't make any sense. Then I tried dividing 24 by nine. Okay: a page every 2.6 hours. No problem. I looked at the Jackson book again: fuck you, Wm, again. Ha—there was my idea! I could write a paper about how much I hated Wm Henry—and Thomas Moran, and F.V Hayden, too—how they were a blight on American history and the American landscape—how their role in preserving Yellowstone was an error, how the park should be blown up, mined—the idea of a national park, a wilderness preserve—was just a cruel fucking joke on unborn generations who would never know true wilderness, anyway, but would still have to find true wildness in their souls—

“So.” Holt. He put the Goetzman book down, and sat there with his thinning hair and tired eyes looking at me. Sitting up a little straighter now that I wasn't making him read anything. “What else have you been doing this semester?”

He didn't really want to know.

“I don't know.” Me. “I was in jail. I went to Big Bend for spring break. I was witness to a murder.”

“Damn!”

The innocents. They never understood. I grabbed a pen and began writing:

Following the Yellowstone River south upstream into what is now the national park, Wm Henry Jackson and Thomas Moran were deluded—

Deluded into what? By what?

“Tell me about the murder.” Holt. Sitting up now, and leaning forward across the table. Interested. “What happened?”

“You don’t want to hear about that.” Me.

“I don’t want to hear about some stupid paper you’re never going to finish.”

“What?”

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And that, too. What to say about *that*? A night where a lot of things went wrong, especially for the dead guy, and one or two things went right. It was how we started the New Year, Barnes and myself—and the murderer—and how the dead guy ended it.

New Year’s Eve: I didn’t even know where we were. Barnes drove—I wasn’t paying attention—to the party, at Podraza’s, who worked at the same pawnshop chain as Barnes, World of Pawn: he was manager of Store #3, and he did well, was a short-broad-shouldered guy with a fuzzy soul-patch under his lip, very intense. Podraza lived in some house, down some street, somewhere on the East Side, an old house, but it was fixed up nice, and of course like any pawnbroker, his house was full of stuff—lots of stuff, all kinds of stuff: anything interesting that comes up out of pawn, the manager will get in there first to buy it, and so they end up with every fucking conceivable power tool, gun, or electronic gizmo known to man. At Podraza’s we went in through the garage, where we grabbed cups of beer from a keg, and the garage was stacked with top-of-the-line drills, sanders, chipping hammers, circular saws, jig saws—table saws, miters—enough goddamn tools to set up a construction—or destruction—business, and then we went into the living room, packed with people from all the World of Pawns, all dancing to Kanye West coming out of who knows how many speakers and three or four huge flat screen TVs all with some

football game on—the Sun Bowl, I think, fucking Oklahoma was playing, those assholes—and Christmas lights still sparkling twinkling flashing and the people all jumping around, writhing; Podraza’s wife, Evie, a little square-shouldered woman with glasses and a big tattoo of a Cyclops on her left bicep, jumping around, too, and she yelled at us happily, and we went on through to the kitchen, where it was all a bit calmer, people making margaritas and talking, and I was getting a margarita to go with my beer when Podraza came by and grabbed me and Barnes and took us tramping up the stairs and down a hall to his gunroom—a room with a safe full of pistols and rifles and shotguns. Podraza took out his newest shotgun, a Marlin Model 55 12-gauge goose gun with a huge long barrel.

“Fuck.” Me. “You go goose hunting much?”

“Fuck no!” Podraza. He was just showing off. He laid out some lines of what I thought was crank but later found out wasn’t speed but sheba, sweet dreamy heroin, and we all did a line, and then I left Barnes with him talking pawn gossip and I went tromping back down the stairs and through the dancing pawnbrokers—T. Pain playing now—and back out to the kitchen and the margaritas—the blender whirring and the bass in the front room thumping and people yelling: a Gatsby party. I wasn’t jangled or velocitized, just dreamily vague from the sheba, sort of taking it all in. In the kitchen was this old hippie musician, Zollie, who worked at Store #7 with Barnes, and he was rocking back on his heels and saying “Aw, damn,” every few minutes very cheerfully, though he was also keeping an eye on his wife, a retired stripper named Honey, who was wandering around with her boobs half hanging out and her belly piercing glittering, Zollie smoking a joint and hitting the tequila pretty good. There were three Vietnamese sisters in the kitchen, all

of them pawnbrokers at one World of Pawn or another, and I was talking to one of them, Vanessa, part-time pawnbroker and full-time student, and I think she kind of liked me.

“I’m an outlaw!” Me. “Give me any situation—I’ll brink it.”

“Sounds dangerous!” Vanessa, laughing.

“I defy the laws of man and god, I defy gravity—I defy common sense! I ain’t nothing but a rebel!”

“Should I be scared?”

“No—of course not—I work only for the forces of good!”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah!”

Everyone was yelling over the music from the front—Ludacris, then old Prince—people dancing now in the kitchen, Honey saying something sharp to Zollie—yeah, I was looking at her boobs, too—a scattering of brown freckles across the top of her chest, flecks of gold and green glittering plastic mylar in her hair. A New Year coming, ready to unspool like a spool of Kevlar thread, and I was ready to unspool, too—no doubt a good year was coming, nothing but good news for everyone—

Then somebody counted down and—bang!—it was a New Year and people were cheering in the front room and there were tequila shots going around and I kissed Vanessa and one of her sisters, the girls tasting like salt and lime, and then Barnes was there.

“Time to go—”

“What? No!”

“We’ll be back—we’ll be back—we’ll be back.” Barnes—babbling, eyes glowing.

“We’ll be back. We just need to run out and play the first pool game of the New Year—we’ve got to celebrate, mark the occasion, play a little stick—”

And that made sense. Mark the occasion. I looked at Vanessa. “Come with us—”

“Pool?” Vanessa, as if that was a very strange idea. She looked at her sisters. I could feel the vibrations of the house—everything throbbing, booming—

“Yeah!” Me.

“You’re crazy!” Vanessa.

“Yeah!” Me. Then Barnes was dragging me out the back door. “Wait for me!”

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So, now, sitting on the patio in the bright spring sunshine with grackles hopping and fluttering around—one big grackle pecking angrily at an empty Styrofoam cup—now, sitting with Holt, and he was looking at me.

“So, the murder was at the party?”

“No, no.” Me. “We were at the party—it was New Year’s, and then we went out, and then things happened.”

“Long story.” Holt.

What the fuck. “You’re the one who wanted to hear it.”

“Well, yeah—”

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We ended up at a bar called the Manhattan Club. It’s over on a side street off of East Sixth—not the nightclub district East Sixth where all the kiddie drunks go, but east East Sixth, way east of the interstate, on the far East Side, where all the brown and black people

live. The Manhattan Club—I hadn't been there before, had never heard of it, didn't even know where it was until a few days later when I went driving around to see what had happened, wherever whatever happened, and I found it sort of half-hidden behind some yaupon holly. But that night was New Year's and Barnes was driving, the great wheel man, and the night was cloudy and damp and cool, with sometimes a little bit of wind, and there were little flashes of light in the sky, fireworks going off, and cheerful little pops from rockets or people shooting guns in the air, you know—celebrating the changing year.

Then the car skidded to a stop and I braced myself against the dashboard.

"The Manhattan Pub!" Barnes. "The Manhattan Pub—a little taste of the Big Apple in the heart of Texas."

And there it was: a red neon sign that said BEER. Below that a white sign, a handmade wooden sign with a light shining on it that said "Manhattan Pub." And so out of the car and across the street and into the bar all warm and smoky—and everything inside didn't quite come to a stop, a quite come to a standstill, everyone turning and looking at us, not quite—but it was close. Felt close. People noticed us, for sure: Barnes and myself were the only Anglos in the room. Everyone else was Mexican, mostly male—I could see a very few women off at tables near the walls—the bar crowded and smoking with Spanish music that sounded cheerful and sad at the same time, though my Spanish was too lousy to pick up on the words being sung.

Barnes put quarters down on the edge of one of two pool tables, the one furthest from the bar, and there were already four quarters ahead of us from people waiting to play, and I went up to the bar—it was busy there, too, the bartender an intense younger guy with

slicked back hair, and I eventually got his attention and ordered six Budweisers. When I got back to the table with the beers, Barnes was waiting leaning against the wall.

“Here we are, Travis.” Barnes. “The New America. Se habla espanol.”

“Yeah.” Me. “It’s pretty cool.”

“Ninety percent of these people will be in the pawn shop this year.” Barnes gestured, waved his arm at the people, at the whole bar. “They’ll be coming in pawning their screwdrivers, their lunchboxes—fifty cents, here, a dollar there. We’ll exploit them, and then somebody else will exploit us.”

“Sure.” Me. The code of the pawn shop. “Big fish eat the little fish.”

Barnes handed one of our beers to a short Mexican man standing against the wall.

“Have you met our friend Carlos?”

“Hey.” Me.

“I’m feeling good!” Carlos stuck out his hand and I shook it.

“Muy barocho, eh?” Me.

Carlos nodded, stood swaying in the smoky bar.

“I think I’m going to offer him a job at World of Pawn.” Barnes.

Why not? Made sense to me. As much sense as anything else. World of Pawn always needed Spanish-speaking clerks. Then it was our time to play pool, and Barnes racked and I broke, and Barnes beat me. Then I racked and he broke, and he beat me again. My game was off, my brain was off—I wasn’t jangled but dreamy: the New Year was only an hour or so old, and things were already going wrong. I’ve always heard that whatever you do on the first day of the year, you do for the rest of the year, and I was

losing. Not a good sign, not at all, and I thought of Vanessa—how she tasted of the New Year—a much more pleasant thought.

“Let’s go back to the party.” Me.

“What’s wrong with you?” Barnes. “We just got here—go buy more beers and maybe I’ll let you beat me.”

So I crossed the room, music playing, smoke in the air. When I got to the bar, I found a black guy sitting there, sitting on a stool—very odd that was, odder and more out-of-place even than the Anglo-ness of Barnes and myself—but I didn’t really think anything about him, he was just there, drinking a beer. I noted his presence, his oddness, but I didn’t think about it, and I stepped up to the bar to buy more beers, tried to get the bartender’s attention, and then I heard someone say “nigger.”

I noticed that.

I turned to look, and as I did, the black guy bumped into me, a soft bump. I stepped back a bit, staggered back into whoever was behind me. People were clearing out of the way—something was going on—a Mexican in a dark jacket was moving forward—a punch or something, and a noise, a ripping sound, something, something—I don’t know what it was. Ripping. The black guy leaning into me, the Mexican in the dark jacket coming at him. I had a twenty dollar bill in my hand to pay for the beers—I remember that. I somehow slid around the black guy and said, “Hey—hold it.” Hey—hold it. What the fuck was I doing?

Listen, I can still see that fist coming at me—coming out of the darkness, I can count the knuckles on it. I know, that sounds stupid, like a cliché, but its true—I can still see it. That fist coming straight at my face and them—blam! Bang! Impact—holy shit, and I

went reeling back from the bar—stumbling staggering backwards, until I hit a table and fell across it, and then the table collapsed sideways, bottles and pitchers of beer showering down on me, falling with me, and I thought—whoa, this is just like a movie. Another total cliché, but that’s what I thought.

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“But I think I remember you saying in class that clichés were clichés because they were true.” Me. “Or something. Right?”

“What the hell.” Holt.

“But you did say that, right?”

“Maybe—yeah, probably. But what happened? What started the fight?”

“Fuck if I know.” Me. “I was just standing there at the bar, and I heard somebody call the black guy a nigger.”

“Jesus.”

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I don’t think I was knocked out. There was a gap after the clichés, after hitting the table, a gap, and then I heard Barnes yelling, “He’s down! He’s down! He’s limp!” Me, limp. But I somehow got up, all drenched with spilled beer and cigarette ashes, stumbling up. Staggering. I saw that the bar was almost vacant—almost empty, everybody gone running away, everyone gone but the bartender with his slicked-back hair, and the black guy, and drunk Carlos—and Barnes, and me. The black guy was hunched over holding his belly, swaying a bit, Barnes with a hand on his shoulder, peering into his face. Carlos kept saying, “Oh, man.”

Barnes. “Call 911.”

The bartender said something like, He don’t need 911, he’s fine.

“Call 911.”

The black guy tried sitting on a barstool then, first he felt around for it with one hand, then he tried sliding up and on. The bartender said, He’s fine. Then the black guy fell off the barstool and hit the floor—thud. Oh, man. He’s fine! Barnes bent over him and then straightened up, stood up, his arms covered up to his elbows in blood.

The bartender bolted—I don’t know where he went.

Barnes took my jacket off—I took it off and gave it to him, I don’t remember but I guess he asked for it—took my jacket, and wrapped the black guy in it. I thought, I have a cell phone. I do remember thinking that, so maybe I was coming out of being punch-drunk—I have a cell phone. So I punched in the keys for 911, told them we needed the cops, needed an ambulance. But where? I didn’t know where the fuck we were. Some bar down some street somewhere. The New York Pub, I remembered. The Manhattan Club! Barnes yelled. Seventh Street! So that’s what I said. Barnes was doing mouth-to-mouth on the black guy—I wondered if you’re supposed to do that for a guy who’d been stabbed, I wondered if that might pump all his blood out. I didn’t know—don’t know. I just stood there with Carlos watching. Then the ambulance came and the medics came running in, and then the cops. The medics tossed my jacket in the corner and I got it and put it on, all bloody and dripping. Barnes was telling a big fat white cop, “We saw what happened!” I said, “Yeah, we saw what happened.” But the cop said, We know what happened, the guy got stabbed.

We saw it! We saw it!

You guys need to get the fuck out. And so the cop pushed us—just pushed us—to the back door and through it and out into the alley, and the door shut.

And so that was really about it, what happened. We were out in the alley, and Carlos was crying now, and Barnes was crying—Barnes! Crying!—and I was standing there with my cell in my hand, dripping blood and gore from my jacket, cold, and all of a sudden I remembered that twenty dollar bill I'd had in my hand. Where'd that go? What happened to my twenty dollars? That's all I cared about. I wanted my twenty fucking dollars.

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“So, basically, I suck.” Me.

“The cops didn't take your names?”

“What?” Was Holt listening? “Fuck no.”

“But you were witnesses!”

“Cops don't care.” Me. I couldn't look at Holt. I looked past him, down the courtyard to an ATM machine: some kid punching numbers into the machine, taking money. I didn't want to talk any more—I'd talked too much. Of course more shit happened: we went back to the party, told the story to Podraza, then went out to breakfast all bloody, then to the cop station to make them listen, the fuckers, and they eventually caught the murderer. But there was no reason to tell Holt—or anyone. We sat quietly for a while.

“Okay.” Holt, finally. “So, okay, tell me something—why are you wasting your time trying to write this piece of shit?” He pushed the William Henry Jackson proposal across the table to me. I didn't say anything.

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Okay. How about:

People die all the time, I know, though they usually don't die wrapped up in my jacket, blood and gore soaking through and dripping splatting everywhere. But this is a violent world, just like the old West. Except in a western, they usually shoot each other, not stab each other, and I'm not in most westerns.

No. How about:

I always thought I lived in a book, until it turned out I lived in a movie—a violent one, where bombs go off and people roll around screaming and dying and

Not really.

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In the evening I met up with Barnes at the Tavern, after he got off work, and we sat at the bar under the black-and-white photos of long-gone bartenders, documents from a past where everyone looked like they were having a grand time, people I never knew from a world I couldn't even feel, really—while all around us living people were bustling around and having at least some little fun—Happy Hour.

“No no no no no no no no no—no.” Barnes. “No! This is not a story you want to write.”

“Sure it is.” I was pretty sure, now.

“Some little black guy drawing his last breath in a puddle of blood on a concrete bar floor. Bunch of Mexicans running for the door. Two stupid white guys who don’t know enough to mind their own business!”

“We were heroes!”

“Heroes are stupid.” Barnes. “You got punched in the nose by a murderer. That’s pretty fucking stupid, if you ask me.”

The cops had thought so, too. How come he didn’t stab you? One of the detectives asked me that, and I didn’t know. The murderer punched me, he didn’t stab me. He just didn’t. I just stood there and got punched, got knocked on my ass, and I didn’t ask why.

“Now you’re blaming the victim.” Me.

“And how is this a narrative about the American West?”

“I don’t know.” Me. “We’re in the west, I guess, and I’ll write it as a narrative. I’ll figure it out.”

Actually, I had an idea: how many people die violently in western narratives? Lots of them: people dying everywhere—*Lonesome Dove*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, *High Noon*, *Shane*, *The Wild Bunch*...just about every western had a body count—people dying everywhere, violently. Boot Hill was always full. And how many people got a chance to be in an actual no-shit violent western narrative? Not many—I was the only one I knew. There were other people at the bar that night, sure, but none of them were going to tell the story, or at least tell it like I might be able to tell it. Dr. Holt gave the idea, an outline: compare the murder to a book or movie and then explain what it means—to me. Put it in context, look for meaning, and so forth,

like the teachers always wanted you—wanted me—to do. Of course, now I had to figure out what it meant and I had to figure out how to write it.

“Better get busy figuring if you’re gonna get it done.” Barnes.

“Oh, I’ll pull it off.” Me.

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

We were sitting at the bar and I could see past Barnes to the door, and I looked up and saw Nelda Krueger come in with some other girls.

“Stop drooling.” Barnes. He didn’t even turn to see who I was looking at.

“What?” Me. “Fuck you.”

The girls were looking for a place to sit in the crowded bar, looking. I slid off my barstool and went over.

“Hey.” Me.

“Oh—” Nelda looked surprised, though we ran into each other pretty often around town, Nelda always with a pack of girls who sort of looked alike, flat blond hair and blue or brown eyes, basic ordinary everyday white girls. Nelda was a bit darker. “What’re you doing here?”

“Drinking.” Me. “It’s Happy Hour!”

“There’s a table.” A blond girl pointed. “By the window.”

They started working their way toward the empty table. I grabbed my mug of beer—Barnes was already intently talking to some guy next to him—and followed the girls over.

“Still working on your paper?” Me.

“Oh, I finished.” Nelda.

“No shit?” Me. How’d that happen? “What’d you write about?”

“Uh, *A River Runs through It*.”

“Yeah? You liked that?”

“Brad Pitt was in the movie.” Nelda. A waitress came over and took orders from the girls, then took some time looking at their fake IDs before heading to the bar to get the drinks.

“He gets killed at the end.” Me. The character, Paul, gets killed in the book, too—it has a violent ending: really, the whole book is about dealing with the aftermath of violence. I thought about that.

“I wrote about environmentalism, stuff like that.” Nelda. “Hey—our class, didn’t you think there was too much work? There was way too much reading.”

“Well, it’s an English class.”

“Too much reading!”

One of the girls showed Nelda something on her cell, and Nelda laughed. “He’s so crazy!” Cell phone girl cackled and bent over the keys, texting away some nonsense or other. Nelda watched her, half smiling, cheerful about something, and then she looked at me.

“So, you finished too, right?”

“Naw—I barely started.”

“Travis!” Nelda—a shriek, almost. I sat back. “It’s due tomorrow—you better get to work!”

“Fuck it.” Me. The other girls were all laughing at something—all of them looking at their phones. “The thing is, I’m changing my topic—I might have to take an incomplete.”

“That’s crazy!” Nelda.

“No, it makes sense.”

The waitress brought over the drinks they’d ordered—cocktails, something pale and citrus-y looking.

“To the end of the semester!” Nelda. Everyone—even me—raised their glasses and clinked them, all smiling and happy. Cheers! Well, I guess.

“Drinking games!” The first girl with the phone. Drinking games. Holy shit.

Drinking games: I could never understand why people my age couldn’t just hang out and get drunk and bullshit around—why getting fucked up had to be turned into a stupid game, had to be hidden, turned into something other than what it was. I think it was maybe the DARE propaganda kicking in again, school-imposed anti-intoxication guilt. People wanted to get loaded, and they were going to get loaded, but they felt guilty about it and tried to turn it into something else—a game. Kids were always wild for the drinking games—one of the reasons I hung around with people older than me.

“Thumb master!”

“Beat the bitch!”

“No.” Nelda. “Questions!”

They agreed on Questions, a game as stupid as any other: One player—it was almost always girls playing Questions, but of course there I was sitting with them—asks a question of another, and the questionee fires a question at someone else, and on and on—but if the questionee laughs or pauses or answers the question, she has to take a drink.

“Brittney.” Nelda. “When was the last time you got laid?”

“Whitney.” Brittney. “How much are you going to drink tonight?”

“Manda.” Whitney. “What’d you do that time you forgot the condoms?”

I drank on every question. Almost bored. I looked up and saw Barnes looking at me, shaking his head, disappointed in me. Barnes always told me I was wasting my time with college girls, that I would never get anywhere with them, that I was crazy, that I had nothing to offer—no money, no job, no position—no life. Barnes said that the only way I could get laid was to concentrate on bored, middle-ages divorcees, who were looking for fun, not a boyfriend—and it was true that about the only times I got laid lately were with women in their thirties or forties who were drunk or crazy or fucked-up in one way or another, like the woman at the Chili Parlor—which was fine with me.

“Nelda,” Jenna said. “Where’s the strangest place you’ve done it?”

“Travis.” Nelda. She took a big breath. “When’re you going to finish that paper?”

I paused—drank.

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Okay. How about:

On January 1st of this year I witnessed the murder of Dwayne Richard Hance. In the time since then I have been trying to figure out what it all means and I’m still not sure but think it has something to do with a narrative of violence. In my paper I will compare what happened to me to what happened to Donnie in *The Big Lebowski* and to Paul in *A River Runs Through It*—I think it’s what happens after the deaths that is important, and that is what I will write about.

It would have to do, and so I hit the print button and listened to the hounds out front baying at a jogger or something, and then it was time to go.



I was about half-lost when Nelda texted me saying that she was lost for real, and I almost ran off the road reading her text: I looked up—death staring me in the face once again, I was heading for some trees—but I dropped the phone and corrected my steering and straightened up and saw Dr. Braddock’s street. I pulled in and stopped by the curb and collected my phone and answered Nelda.

Im parked at Westlake and her street now
you can probly see my car

About five minutes later Nelda came along, from the wrong direction, and I guess she saw me and pulled into the street and rolled down her window.

“GPS is a big lie!” Nelda. “I’ve been driving around out here for hours!”

“You have to know how to read it.” Me.

“It lies!”

She sped off and I followed her up the street to the cul-de-sac, and I parked in front of Dr. Braddock’s house. Nelda circled around a couple of times before stopping on the far side, and she got out of the car carrying a bottle of orange juice. Oh—I remembered then it was a party, and I was supposed to bring chips, and I didn’t. Oh well.

“This place is so weird.” Nelda. She followed me up the path to the house and through the gate. “Did you finish?”

“Got my proposal finished.” Me. “Either I get an incomplete or I get nothing.”

“You’re crazy!”

“Yeah—” I knocked on the door and it popped open, and Dr. Braddock was there in a cream-colored sweater and jeans and boots, a pair of reading glasses hanging from a cord around her neck, and I could see past her into the front room of the house. Jared was in there, and the artsy girl, and a couple of the boring girls. There was a nook just off the kitchen, with a table covered with food and whatever—other people brought chips, which was good cover for me, and there were cookies and celery sticks and various gross things that I wouldn’t ever eat. Nelda dumped her jug of juice on the counter and grabbed a cookie, and we followed Dr. Braddock into the front room.

“So, you have your papers ready?” Dr. Braddock. She stood in the middle of the room, and I could see a pile of folders on the floor next to the fireplace. Nelda and I were both carrying pocket folders, hers purple, mine dark blue—hers was purple, and it was also thick: there was a paper in it. Mine was blue and skinny: all it carried was a one-page—one paragraph!—proposal, a printout of the tiny newspaper story about the murder, and the few aborted pages of the failed Wm Henry Jackson paper.

Nelda handed her folder over: I held mine back, looking at Nelda’s folder in Dr. Braddock’s hand.

“Can I.” Me. Choking, almost. “Can—I talk to you—about my paper?”

Everybody else heard me, of course, Jared and the boring girls. Well, fuck them.

“Oh—” Dr. Braddock. “Well, sure.”

“Uh, alone?”

Nelda frowned at me, a mocking frown or a supportive frown, I don’t know. A frown.

“Sure—let’s go up to my office.” Dr. Braddock turned and went up the stairs and I followed her, and I could see her boots ahead of me on the stairs: tall and black with green

ivy leaves worked into the leather. Her office was the first room on the left, bright sun coming through the window, pictures of Austin and the university all over the walls, not framed pictures, but what looked to be computer printouts—some shots of the south mall, statues, old pictures of parades and football games, street scenes. I stopped in front of an old black and white picture of a tornado—a funnel cloud, at least—hovering over the capitol dome.

“Wow.” Me.

“My next project, I think.” Dr. Braddock sat in a big soft chair behind her desk and wheeled around to face me. “Austin, the university—how they influence each other, what it means.”

Yeah—somehow things always came down to meaning, whatever the fuck meaning is.

“Sit down.” Dr. Braddock was watching me.

The only other chair in the room had a big orange tomcat stretched out in it, dozing.

“That’s Fred—you can move him.”

I scooped the cat up under my arm and sat down in the chair. Fred the cat stayed limp on my lap, began to purr.

“So?” Dr. Braddock. “What’s up?”

“Well, I don’t have anything for you.” Me. Might as well tell the truth. “I want to change my topic—I have a proposal.” I offered her the blue folder while I steadied Fred the cat with my other hand.

“You have a proposal.” Dr. Braddock stopped. She was kind of half-smiling, maybe. “For a paper that’s due today—for a paper that’s due right now.”

“Yeah.” Me. “I guess I’ll have to take an incomplete, too—if I can.”

“Okay.” Dr. Braddock. She was just looking at me. “So, you don’t think you can finish the paper this afternoon?”

“Uh, no.”

“How about before I turn the grades in next week?” She was fucking with me.

I guess deserved it—yeah, I did. I just shook my head. I leaned forward and dropped the proposal on her desk, and she took it and put her glasses on and looked at it—which took maybe two seconds—and I told her the story: not as much as I’d told Holt, I just told her the important parts, and Dr. Braddock listened, the big cat stretched out across me.

“Well, the incomplete’s not a big deal.” Dr. Braddock. Took her glasses off and let them hang. “It just leaves me with one less paper to grade, and it’ll turn into an F automatically if you don’t do anything.”

“Okay.”

“About your proposal.” She put her glasses back on, and looked at the sheet of paper for longer than it would take to read it. “You compare what you witness—what you experienced—to what happens to Donnie and to Paul in the texts you cite—but they died. Right? And you didn’t die, so you’re not really like them at all. You’re not the victim here.”

“Uh.” Me, blushing. Why did she always make me blush? “I guess not. No.”

“I think you just worded that clumsily.” Dr. Braddock. “You might want to take more time and think a bit when you actually write your paper.”

“Okay.”

“I wonder, though, how you’re going to pull this off.” Dr. Braddock waited a long time, but I didn’t say anything—didn’t have anything to say. I was wondering that, too,

actually, a little. “It’s a big topic, and it could be a really good essay. But the problem you have is something that all young writers have—and I know this because I was a young writer, too—and that’s being shallow.”

I sat back as far as I could with the cat on me. Shallow? Did she just call me stupid?

“Now, I don’t mean that in a negative way—I just mean you can’t help it. Young people are—young—they don’t have context, or perspective, or experience.”

“I’m working on that—” Me. My life!

“Sure! But if you’re going to do this right, you’re going to have to figure out what it means—meant, the death of—” Dr. Braddock looked at the proposal.

“Hance.” Me.

“Hance. What his death meant—and means, to you. It’s going to be hard. It might take years—it might take a lifetime.”

I sat there. Back to meaning again. Meant. Fuck. I sat there, didn’t say anything.

“But I think you should do it—it just won’t be easy.”

“Okay.” I could still agree with her, she was doing me a favor. And she probably knew more about writing essays than I did. It was easiest to agree with her about everything.

“Yeah?” Dr. Braddock was leaning over the desk toward me. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” Me. Sure, okay.

We came back down the stairs and Nelda made another face at me—but, you know, I was feeling kind of good, finally, all of a sudden. I’d dodged that bullet—or that knife, or whatever—I’d dodged it, and now I had a year to write the goddamn paper, a year to figure out what it meant, if meant anything.

A couple of the wussy frat boys had arrived, and Dr. Braddock collected their papers. I sat next to Nelda on the saggy couch. Dr. Braddock put the new folders on the pile and then went into the kitchen.

“So?” Nelda, almost a whisper.

“Everybody get something to eat?” Dr. Braddock, from the kitchen. “Or snack on?”

“Incomplete.” Me, not whispering.

“Crazy lazy!” Nelda. “Why didn’t you just sit down and write it? Or pay somebody to write it for you?”

Dr. Braddock came back through carrying a plate covered in plastic, and she went through the room and out onto the deck. There was a big shiny new gas grill out there, and she began putting burgers on to cook.

“So.” Dr. Braddock, leaning in the door with a spatula in her hand. “Why don’t we get started?”

Everyone sat there, uncomfortable.

“What I’d like you to do.” Dr. Braddock. “I’d like you to go around the room, and everyone should talk about something they’re taking away from this class. Some memory—it could be from the material we covered, it could be something funny someone said....”

Well. That seemed kind of stupid and touchy-feely. I pushed up out of the couch, trying not to sink back onto Nelda, and I went around the corner to the bathroom and shut the door. Dr. Braddock had a vanilla-scented candle burning in the bathroom, and I turned on the water and ran it while I peed. I looked down, into the corner of the room, and I saw a cat bed there, with a cat in it, an old gray tabby, looking back at me.

“Hello, cat.”

The cat blinked and I flushed the toilet and rinsed off my hands, and dried them—and then I brought a little plastic bag out of the change pocket of my jeans, a plastic bag with whitish yellowish powder—crank, of course. I took my car key—the ignition key, hey—and shoveled a key-full up one nostril, then the other, then back to the first for good luck. Yes! Keys back to pocket, crank back to pocket:::::and I looked at the cat, looking at me.

“Yes!” Me. Everything made sense now, or something did—something. Meaning! Meant! I turned off the water and gathered up the cat, and went back out to the living room.

“Uh....” The artsy girl was talking, trying to talk, watching me come out of the bathroom. “Okay, I remember, like, when you—Travis.” She pointed at me, and I stood there with the cat. “You said you wanted to drop a bomb on your parents! That was so cool!”

“I am a bomb—I drop myself.” Me. I dropped the cat gently onto Nelda’s lap:::::and she caught it and both of them looked confused. “I think you need a cat.”

“And I’ll always remember how you came to class hungover all the time.”

Everyone laughed at me.

“And we had good discussions, too.” Artsy girl. I guess she liked the class. “There was a lot of freedom.”

“We did have some very good discussions!” Dr. Braddock, from out on the deck. The grill top was open, and thin gray meat smoke was rising toward the sky. A couple of other people were out on the deck, helping her or watching, and I stood there, the bitter crank

taste rolling down my throat—wonderful, brilliant, astonishing—and after a moment I stepped out onto the deck to get a soda from an ice chest.

“Nelda?” Dr. Braddock. “It’s your turn.”

“Uh....” Nelda was still holding the gray cat. She let him flop to the floor, and the cat sat for a minute, looking pissed, and then stalked slowly off, his ears cocked back. “Uh, I guess everybody’s already said everything I remember.”

“That won’t do.” Dr. Braddock. “You need to come up with something—just one thing.”

“—the movies?” Nelda. “I guess I liked the movies, and I like the pictures we looked at.”

“So you liked the visual component of the class?” Dr. Braddock.

“Yeah!”

“That’s fine.” Dr. Braddock turned around, faced me, still holding the big spatula in her hand, and I had a quick thought that she might smack me with it, and I laughed.

“Travis? You get to finish.”

“Fuck, I don’t know.” Me. Whoops. Cursed at a teacher, but I didn’t care, didn’t have time to think about caring. Well:::::the class, the class::kicking idiot Jared out of my special seat had been a triumph, but other than that, all the days, the weeks, the minutes, all the time going by—words people places— “Everything?”

“C’mon, Travis, saying everything’s like saying nothing.” Dr. Braddock.

“No—really!” Me. It was everything! “Really—this was a good class. I, uh—liked the readings, the movies—”

“But what are you going to remember? What one thing are you going to take with you?”

Well, fuck. There really was only everything, even if I had to call it one thing.

William Henry Jackson. Dwayne Richard Hance. Barnes. Broughton. Holt. Carlos. The hounds. Jail. One thing, and it was everything—all things, and everybody, merged into one great big thing.

“Uh, I don’t know.” Me. How to say it? “Working on my paper that I didn’t finish?”

“Perfect!” Dr. Braddock. She turned around and flipped a burger. “See—it’s the process that’s important. I kept telling students that, but they never pay attention.”

“Well.” Me. The pressure off. “That’s because they don’t know enough to care.”

Almost all my little classmates were sitting around smirking at me—but so what? They’d all die if they tried to do what I did, if they tried to live my life, think my thoughts—and while maybe it was true, like Barnes had said, that most of them didn’t *want* to do what I did—that didn’t matter, because I was doing it anyway, for them:::out there, in the night, in the day, jangling, cranked—thinking, yes, this was the way it was—nighttime neon arson and daytime traffic jams, people everywhere, going through their dull daily lives, none of them really caring about anything, and only I knew it—only I could see—only—

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

In the summary to my 2005 MA thesis, *Either Side of a Line*, I stated that I was attempting to depict aspects of life in 21st century Texas, a “complex time of boom and bust, of love and fear, of dislocation and greater dislocation” (94). *Either Side of a Line* was a collection of six short stories, and short stories are, as I have stated earlier in this proposal, concerned mostly with the depiction of the psychology of the individual; therefore, my focus on place in those stories was driven—and limited— by the emotions and perceptions of the stories’ characters. I found this to be a restrictive narrative situation.

With *The Last Educations*, I believe I have found a way to transcend this situation. Through the genre of the novella I will be able to achieve a greater narrative depth, and I will be able to depict a place—a region, a locality—through the expanded activities of characters living and working in an important institution. While I am still concerned with the changing status of the individual, I can, in the novella, represent it more thoroughly and in more detail, and place the individuals in context with the larger changes taking place in society.

For 20 years my work has been concerned with the depiction of the changes and transformations I have seen and experienced in Texas. From my first published story, “It May Be a Day, it May Be Forever,” up to my recently published novel, *That Demon Life*, I have attempted to address the world as I have experienced it. The novellas comprising *The*

Last Educations will be, I think, both a logical extension and a significant advance on my previous work.

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